

Signs of drought weakening as cities roll back watering restrictions

Lower Colorado River Authority cities keep rules in place.

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In the clearest sign that the drought that has wracked Central Texas for two years is weakening, a bevy of cities and water authorities are loosening watering restrictions.

On Tuesday, the City of Georgetown ended watering restrictions that had been in place since Aug. 31. Lake Georgetown, the city announced, had rebounded to full levels by Monday morning. Since it reached a low point of 766.81 feet above mean sea level on Sept. 11, the lake has risen nearly 30 feet.

On Friday, the City of Round Rock, which also gets water from Lake Georgetown, announced that mandatory watering restrictions there had been shelved.

And last week, San Marcos backed away from special watering restrictions and returned to the year-round water conservation rules that allow residents to use sprinklers any day except during the hours of 10 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Still, with the Highland Lakes only half-full, yet rising, cities that rely on the Colorado River, including Austin, are continuing mandatory limits on water use.

Elsewhere, officials continue to ask homeowners to voluntarily conserve water. In Georgetown, for instance, that means watering no more than three times a week and no sprinkler use from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. or any time on Mondays.

In a letter mailed Tuesday, the Brazos River Authority, which monitors pumping from Lake Georgetown, told the Brushy Creek Municipal Utility District and the Chisolm Trail Special Utility District, as well as Georgetown and Round Rock, that it was terminating drought watch and drought warning declarations, said Judi Pierce, a spokeswoman for the

river authority.

Groundwater regulators are also seeing their supplies improve.

Last Thursday, the board of the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District, which regulates pumping of well-water that supplies more than 50,000 people in northern Hays and southern Travis counties, including Buda and Kyle, decided to downgrade its drought stage from "critical" to "alarm." Under critical stage, pumpers had to cut their use by 30 percent; in alarm stage, they have to cut use by 20 percent.

"The local groundwater drought is not over," Kirk Holland, the district's general manager, said in a written statement, "but we finally received enough rain in the right places to start having some effective replenishment of the aquifer."

Earlier this month, the Edwards Aquifer Authority, which serves approximately 1.7 million people, including those in parts of Hays, Caldwell and Comal counties, also announced an end to mandatory water restrictions.

Cool, rainy conditions, combined with less water use — outdoor watering nosedives with the rainfall — helps further ease stress on water supplies, said Robin Gary, a spokeswoman for the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District.

According to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor map, now nearly a week old, most of Travis County is suffering through "moderate drought"; in the late summer it was graded as enduring the worst-class "exceptional drought."

Matthew Rosencrans, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center, said the drought condition will likely improve when the next map is released Thursday.

He said that through Monday, this month has ranked as the 11th wettest October at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport since 1943; it has been the 19th wettest October at Camp Mabry since 1856. More rain is expected this week, and forecasters predict a wetter-than-normal winter.

But the Lower Colorado River Authority, the chief water supply manager of Central Texas, continues to strike a cautious pose. The cities that depend on the Colorado River for their water continue to implement an August directive from the LCRA calling for mandatory watering restrictions. The LCRA had issued the request after the combined storage of the Highland Lakes fell below 900,000 acre-feet.

Lakes Travis and Buchanan, which reached a low point of storage of 789,356 acre-feet on Sept. 10, the lowest since a 1964 drought, now have 985,872 acre-feet. An acre-foot is about the amount of water used by three average Austin homes in a year.

"At this point, we're asking customers to stay under mandatory restrictions," said Emlea

Chanslor, a spokeswoman for the LCRA.

Cedar Park spokeswoman Melanie Carr said the city, which relies on the LCRA for water, "is reviewing the need for mandatory restrictions."

As of now, the City of Austin is not easing its mandatory restrictions, according to Austin Water Utility spokesman Kevin Buchman.

"We spent dollars on advertising, education efforts, and media to implement (mandatory restrictions)," he said. "We don't want to lift those restrictions and then we stop getting rain, the lakes fall again, and we have to implement (mandatory restrictions) again."

"We don't want to have the yo-yo effect occur," he said.

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