

# MWD may cut water to area cities

**Facing shortages, the agency is reviewing a new allocation formula, which some contend penalizes older areas.**

By Deborah Schoch  
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

January 7, 2008

The Metropolitan Water District is considering a contingency plan to cut water deliveries to its member cities using a new formula that critics contend favors faster-growing areas while penalizing older, poor communities.

The district's staff is recommending the plan in case the agency, which serves 18 million people in six counties, is forced to slash water deliveries this spring in the event of continuing shortages.

This weekend's heavy rainfall will do little to ease those shortages because Southern California depends heavily on imported water that has been reduced by prolonged drought and court-ordered cutbacks, water officials said Sunday.

The current discussion signals growing worries that the region's water supplies cannot meet demand, due to last year's record dry weather, an eight-year drought in the Colorado River Basin and a federal court order last month that sharply reduces water deliveries from Northern California.

The MWD is also considering rate hikes of 10% to 20% for next year, in part to buy more water to shore up supplies.

The new formula for water allocations will be publicly discussed this afternoon in Los Angeles by a panel of the MWD board of directors. A final vote by the full board is not expected until February or March, MWD officials said.

The plan could be activated as early as May, although that is unlikely, the officials said.

The formula recommended by the MWD staff would be the first adopted by the 80-year-old district, which manages the delivery of water to cities from Ventura County to the Mexican border. It acts as a water wholesaler, importing water from Northern California and the Colorado River and selling it to its 26 member cities and water districts.

The agency did not use a formula during the droughts of the late 1970s and early 1990s, instead cutting deliveries by a set percentage across the board.

The proposed formula would determine how much water is allotted to cities and water agencies. Most MWD water is sold to cities at \$508 per acre-foot. If a city or agency exceeds its allotment by up to 10%, it would be charged a penalty fee of \$1,347 per acre-

foot. If it uses even more water, the penalty would be higher. An acre-foot is the amount of water that would cover an acre of land, one foot deep.

The costs would ultimately be borne by ratepayers. All cities and districts would see supplies cut, although details for individual cities were not available last week.

"No one is going to be shielded from this," said MWD spokesman Bob Muir.

Some critics are focusing on several parts of the plan, including its shift away from historic water rights, credits for conservation efforts and the potential effect on low-income residents.

The formula has been debated privately since last summer by MWD staff and officials from water districts throughout the region.

The staff's written recommendation takes into account retail customers and the economy, population growth, losses in local water supplies, conservation efforts and other issues.

For instance, cities might receive more water if a large portion of their supply comes from MWD, if population in their county is growing, or if a large number of low-flow toilets and other water-saving devices have been installed.

MWD was founded in 1928 by a consortium of cities to finance the building of the Colorado River Aqueduct that helped develop Southern California. In return, the act creating the agency granted preferential water rights to the early member cities that paid for the district's infrastructure.

Those cities include Los Angeles, Long Beach, Burbank, Compton, Pasadena and Santa Monica.

Preferential rights would be trumped by the new formula, critics say.

The proposal does not eliminate any preferential rights, MWD officials said in an e-mail Sunday night.

"The purpose in developing this proposal was to determine if there was a more equitable manner to distribute water under today's circumstances."

Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley, an MWD board member, also said Friday that the formula does not require cities to give up their rights.

"We're better off trying to figure this out cooperatively than going back to the way things were before we were born," said Sutley, who is chairwoman of the board's Water Planning and Stewardship Committee.

"I think we all realize that life has changed since then," added the panel's vice chairman, James M. Barrett, San Diego's water director.

But officials in other cities aren't convinced the proposal encourages cooperation or is an improvement. Long Beach and other southeastern L.A. County cities estimate that they would lose 20% more water under the formula than if water was divvied up by preferential rights.

Some say the MWD plan would force lower-income communities to subsidize water use in growing areas.

"We're completely the losers in this current situation," said Joone Lopez, deputy general manager of the City of Commerce-based Central Basin Municipal Water District, which buys water from MWD to serve 2 million people in southern Los Angeles County. About 47% of residents in the Central Basin district are low income, she said.

MWD spokesman Muir, in response to the criticism, said: "The foundation of this plan is equity, and not whether one area is growing and another is built out."

No conservation credits are granted for cities in which residents have heeded calls to use their sprinklers less and added drought-resistant landscaping -- changes that water experts say can save far more water than low-flow toilets and shower heads.

An estimated 40% to 70% of water in the region is used for landscape irrigation.

Long Beach, for instance, has adopted a mandatory plan that achieved 10-year lows in water consumption. Los Angeles residents, by contrast, used slightly more water after Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's call for a voluntary 10% cut.

Cities with successful conservation records in recent dry years could actually lose out, because the MWD staff plans to use the years 2004 to 2006 as the base for making cuts, said Art Aguilar, general manager at the Central Basin district, which, he said, has invested heavily in conservation measures.

"The better water policy you practice, the worse you're going to be under the new allocation plan," Aguilar said. "If we knew this was coming, we could have just used the water, not used any conservation, and been better off."

MWD General Manager Jeff Kightlinger said that his staff sought to measure local conservation with "clear measurable steps" such as low-flow toilets and other devices.

The effects of reduced lawn sprinkling and new drought-resistant landscapes are more difficult to gauge, he said.

Some municipal officials in Los Angeles County say they feel steamrolled by the process.

They say that the formula would penalize low-income minority residents who could be hit twice, by penalty charges and then by proposed 2009 rate increases.

The formula is designed in a way that those cities could be affected more severely than growing cities in the Inland Empire or big cities such as Los Angeles and San Diego, and so would likely pay proportionately more in penalties, they said.

The Southeast Water Coalition, a regional authority that includes Cerritos, Downey, Whittier and eight other cities, has written MWD to ask for more time to review the plan.

The Long Beach Board of Water Commissioners will also send a letter, criticizing key points of the plan and asking for more review.

Kightlinger said that MWD has not been able to confirm that the plan would disproportionately hurt lower income, largely minority cities.

"We haven't been able to verify that that's necessarily correct. There are parts of Riverside County that are very poor," Kightlinger said.

Much of southeastern Los Angeles County are not areas of high growth, meaning that cuts there would have less effect on the economy, he added.

"It's a very complicated social issue, and it's something that we're trying to work through."

L.A. Deputy Mayor Sutley said that she supports creating a plan now, before serious shortages occur.

As for lower-income cities, she said: "We really feel for them, and Los Angeles is in the same position. We have a lot of DWP customers that live below the poverty line."

The plan will be discussed today at 1:30 p.m. at MWD headquarters, Room 2-456, 700 N. Alameda St., Los Angeles.

[deborah.schoch@latimes.com](mailto:deborah.schoch@latimes.com)