

Governor Loosens Water Restrictions

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Georgians living in the counties hardest hit by the drought got a bit of good news this month from Gov. Sonny Perdue and Georgia Environmental Protection Division Director Carol Couch. They can hand-water parched landscapes and fill swimming pools, as long as their local water provider doesn't mind.

"This is great news for children and plants that will soon be looking for relief from the summer heat," said Todd Hurt, a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension specialist.

The easing of water restrictions will be most beneficial to residents in Georgia's northern 61 counties, those classified as drought level 4. "Many of these homeowners have lived under a complete outdoor water use ban since September," Hurt said. "Middle and south Georgia residents are under drought level 2 restrictions which allow to water according to the odd-even system three days a week."

According to Hurt, swimming pools can now be filled at the owner's convenience with no day or hour restrictions. The landscape watering exemptions are a little more confusing, he said.

Hand-watering of landscape plants or turf is allowed for 25 minutes a day between midnight and 10 a.m. "Hand-watering is defined as one person using one garden hose that's equipped with a spray nozzle that shuts off automatically upon release," Hurt said.

Odd numbered addresses can water on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday while even numbered addresses can water on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. "The hand-watering exemption began with the signing of the new executive order," he said.

The new exemptions are more plentiful for residents willing to do some homework, literally. Beginning March 15, property owners can water any new plant or turf installations if they complete an outdoor water use registration program.

"The registration program consists of a PowerPoint presentation of about 50 slides followed by a series of questions," said Hurt, who worked with a team from Georgia EPD, the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the Urban Agricultural Council to design the training materials. "We designed the training module, but we by no means developed the regulations."

The educational module includes information on best water management practices. These include how to water efficiently, put the right plants in the right places, apply mulch, add organic matter to the soil and use collected rain water and air conditioning condensation. After scoring 70 or above on the water use quiz, participants print out a certificate which must be posted in a conspicuous location.

“Once certified, the property owner or someone under their supervision may irrigate new landscape plantings between midnight and 10 a.m. on the odd/even house number system and during the initial installation,” Hurt said. “The main difference here is they are allowed to use their irrigation system and state officials want reassurance they will take some responsibility in conserving water. After all, we are still in a drought.”

The registration program will be available on-line by March 15 at www.urbanagcouncil.com. UGA Cooperative Extension offices in north Georgia hope to assist with the registration process.

“This has been a rushed process to get the exemptions in place before landscapes emerge from their winter sleep,” Hurt said. “Please be patient with extension agents as we learn how to help you with your watering needs.”

From now until the new regulations take effect March 15, the existing commercial exemptions apply.

To view the new state rules online, go to

http://www.gaepd.org/Files_PDF/rules/rules_exist/391-3-30.pdf.