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Will water hold out?

Councilor believes city needs more restrictions on water use

By Tom Sharpe The New Mexican

Santa Fe's water director says the city is prepared for the coming drought, but one city councilor isn't so sure. The snowpack in the mountains east of Santa Fe is at its lowest in more than a century. But Water Division Director Galen Buller said water will continue to flow through city taps due to upgrades in the system since the drought of 2002.

"While we really want people to be cognizant of how dry it is up there and to be prudent in how they use (water), we also have a way to manage the resources that we have to meet our peak-day demand," he said.

Councilor Karen Heldmeyer isn't as confident.

"We have done nothing in terms of updating our drought restrictions," she said. "We have done nothing in terms of an emergency plan for the parks. These are all things that should be done now, and unfortunately, ... everything's kind of in abeyance until after the election."

Buller said since 2002, four new wells in the Buckman area have increased the daily groundwater-production capacity to 12.4 million gallons a day from 10.4 million gallons a day. If necessary, he said, groundwater production could be pushed to 15.2 million gallons a day for short periods.

In addition, the city can pull extra water from its Santa Fe Canyon reservoirs this summer. The surface-water-treatment plant has been down for rehabilitation since the first of the year. But by April, half the plant will be operational and capable of producing another 4 million gallons a day. By July, the whole plant should be working, producing up to 8 million gallons a day.

The two reservoirs along the upper reaches of the Santa Fe River are at 58 percent of capacity — compared to 32 percent in the summer of 2002. Buller said the higher level is a result of good planning. "We shut them off a little early so that in case it was dry, we would have a little more water in the reservoirs, and that's turned out to be good management," he said.

Even the scant snowpack in the watershed should continue to feed the reservoirs so that they reach 66 percent by early summer, Buller said. That means the city could take at least 4 million gallons a day from them for up to 99 days.

Another factor that bodes well for the coming drought is that city residents are using less water than ever before, Buller said.

In 2002, Santa Fe's per-capita water consumption was 140 gallons a day. Now, it is down to 114 gallons a day. Even with population growth, the city Water Division has been able to cut its total production — from 11,108 acre-feet in 2003 to 10,035 acrefeet in 2005.

Buller said the peak day for water use in 2005 came in the second week of July when the city used 15.9 million gallons. When the reservoirs are back on line, he said, the city's total production capacity should be 19.2 million gallons a day — up to more than 23 million gallons a day for short periods.

Heldmeyer said after Wednesday's optimistic report from city Water Division employees to the Public Utilities Committee that she remains concerned about the city's ability to withstand the drought.

"Galen was pretty confident that short of a fire in the watershed ... that it would be close, but it would be OK," she said. "But I don't want to cut it that close. ... The issue of whether we'll get the monsoons or not is an open issue. Nobody seems to be able to predict that one way or another."

While the police and fire departments are cooperating with each other and the city's wildland- and urban-interface specialist, Michelle "Shelley" Rossbach, Heldmeyer said, the city still needs to do more in terms of clearing brush.

She also said she would like to see the city change its emergency restrictions on water use.

The city has been under Stage 2 restrictions since the spring of 2003. For a year before that, it was under the even more restrictive Stage 3. The most restrictive Stage 4 has never been imposed.

Heldmeyer stopped short of calling for the imposition of Stage 3 restrictions. But she said she would like to see some provisions of the higher stage imposed all the time — such as allowing water to be served in restaurants only when customers ask for it.