

Survey offers glimpse into public perceptions of water use

Clark Israelsen features columnist April 5, 2016



The annual Northern Utah Water Conference, held last week at the Utah State University Innovation Campus, was again a success.

Participants listened to skilled presenters address a variety of water topics and subjects. It again became obvious that we all see things through different lenses, but there is a continuing need to engage in important water conversations. Legislative updates, success stories from Box Elder County, along with a presentation on the development of the Bear River underscored again the benefits of a local water conservancy district.

Perhaps the most welcome message of the day was the annual Water Outlook Report from State Hydrologist Randy Julander. Mr. Julander reported that recent storms make this the happiest report he's given in the last four years. Snowpack and anticipated runoff is looking very positive statewide.

Another interesting presentation from USU sociologist Doug Jackson-Smith addressed public perceptions of water use. During the summer of 2014 researchers from Utah State University, the University of Utah and the iUTAH Project undertook a large survey of households on water issues. The general purpose of the survey was to discover what people understood, or did not understand, when it comes to water use.

Surveyors visited 23 neighborhoods in Cache Valley, Salt Lake Valley and Heber Valley and carefully interviewed randomly selected households with an extensive 16-page survey. Highlights from survey findings in five Cache Valley neighborhoods are listed below. Some results are surprising while others are somewhat expected.

The majority of residents are very familiar with how much they spend on water each month, but only about a quarter are familiar with the volume of water they use. When asked how their household indoor water use has changed over the last five years, between 14 and 26 percent of respondents indicate that they had decreased their indoor water consumption. Most agreed they could do more by taking shorter or fewer showers, running the dishwasher only when full, turning off water when brushing teeth, buying low water use appliances, fixing leaky faucets etc.

On average, people reported watering their lawn about three days per week during the summer, and more than 94 percent of respondents water their lawns either in the morning, evening or at night. The majority of Cache Valley respondents try to vary their watering behaviors based on weather conditions, brown spots and a desire to maintain their property value.

A smaller proportion of respondents suggest that keeping their neighbors happy is an important goal in their lawn watering decisions. Only 38 percent of respondents believe they can do more to conserve water outdoors, and 40 percent believe they use less water than average households in their neighborhood.

Since planning for future water challenges is a major focus for local and state government officials, the survey included a block of questions that asked whether the respondent agreed “there is enough water to meet the needs of all people and businesses” in their city, valley and state as a whole. Survey results showed a substantial ambivalence about the sufficiency of local water supplies. Only 24 percent believe the water supply is sufficient to meet the future needs of all people of businesses in Cache Valley.

When asked how best to respond to water shortages, 89 percent of respondents support public education on water conservation. Voluntary reductions in outdoor water use, restricting watering in parks, golf courses, and other public properties were other favored options. Mandatory water restrictions even garnered support from 72 percent of respondents.

A clear majority of residents indicated support for investments in physical infrastructure, including new reservoirs or water storage facilities, and structures to reduce storm water runoff. Only 12 percent perceived excessive water use from agriculture with 85 percent of respondents placing a high priority on safeguarding a dependable supply of water for agricultural purposes. Ensuring a supply of quality drinking water was obviously the highest priority.

Perhaps the biggest surprise to me was that less than 10 percent of respondents knew that local officials have methodically and carefully created a Cache County Water Master Plan to guide future policies and programs. Since small minorities of residents are familiar with the development or content of the plan, there must be an increase in outreach, education and engagement if residents are prepared to vote on Water Master Plan recommendations in early November.

Readers may find additional details at www.iutahepscor.org/hhsurvey and www.cachecounty.org/water/water-conservancy-district-considerations.html
