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Water supply group: Conservation is a must

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January 31, 2010

By **CINDY WOJDYLA CAIN** ccain@stmedianetwork.com

Conservation measures need to be taken now to ensure a steady supply of the water for decades to come, according to the Regional Water Supply Planning Group.

"We're going to have to change some of our habits if we want to have long term water availability," said Joliet engineer Howard Hamilton who is the Will County Storm Water director. Hamilton was a member of the planning group.

The 35-member group, which represents 11 Northeastern Illinois counties including Will, Grundy and Kendall counties, voted Monday to recommend a plan of action to conserve water. Conservation measures recommended by the group include:

- Replacing old toilets and clothes washers with new, high-efficiency ones
- Prohibiting practices that waste water
- Metering water use
- Auditing water systems to detect leaks and other inefficiencies
- Retrofitting residential plumbing
- Finding alternatives to road salt to de-ice roads
- Charging the public for the full cost of delivering water instead of just for the water itself

Also, the group recommended that municipal and regional conservation coordinators should be appointed to oversee water conservation programs.

The three-year effort leading up to the plan and Monday's vote was coordinated by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and funded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Water shortages?

According to a 2008 IDNR-CMAP report, the demand for water could increase 64 percent by 2050 leading to possible serious shortages. If recommended conservation measures are put in place at a moderate pace, an estimated 77.9 million gallons of water per day could be saved. If the measures were stringently adhered to, 269.5 million gallons of water per day could be saved, according to the study.

CMAP will now work on implementing its plan. One step will be to convene a Metropolitan Chicago Water-supply Summit in March.

The planning group has no power to force municipalities and counties to take the water conservation measures, but it will work to convince area leaders of the need, Hamilton said.

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"Right now what they're trying to do is find towns and counties willing to take these things on as recommendations," he said.

Area growth has slowed because of the recession, but if it picks up again, that growth could seriously impact water resources by 2050, Hamilton said.

The water level is dropping in the Ironton-Galesville aquifer, which supplies water to most of Will County, especially Joliet, Hamilton added.

"We are currently using that faster than it's being replenished," he said. "Will County is the largest user of the deep aquifer. That's why it's important to us."

Hamilton said he is seeking a \$1.8 million grant through the Illinois State Water Survey for a study of all water sources in Will County. With the state's financial troubles, the grant may be unlikely now, but Hamilton said the issue must be addressed for the future. Water shortages are unlikely to crop up during his lifetime, but Hamilton said he has three children.

"I'm concerned long range," he said. "I've got three kids and there are smarter decisions we could be taking today to make sure there is water for their kids."

Frankfort efforts

Frankfort Mayor Jim Holland, who represented Will County municipalities on the planning group, agreed. Short term, no community will run out of water, he said. But no one really knows what will happen many decades down the road if the demand for water is not matched by supply.

Holland said Frankfort has been working for 12 years to create more wetlands and to send runoff water back into the shallow aquifer that supplies its water. So far, the measures seem to be working and the aquifer water level has risen. But the deep aquifer that feeds most of Will County is in trouble, Holland said.

"There is no question that the scientists on our group said something will have to give by 2050," he said. "We're literally mining that water."

Unlike shallow aquifers, deep aquifers take hundreds of years to recharge, he said.

Though the recommendations are not binding, the planning group will work hard to get water consumers and governmental leaders to take them seriously, Holland said.

"Water is a valuable resource and it should not be taken for granted," he said. "It needs to be studied more. Shallow and deep aquifers are not well understood and we need to really understand what can be sustained and what can't be."

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