

6.3 Small Utility Outreach and Education

Applicability

Any small Municipal Water User Group (“utility”) that is initiating a water conservation program can adopt this Best Management Practice. A program for providing water conservation information to the public is an effective means of both promoting specific water conservation programs and practices and educating the public about the importance of using water efficiently.

Once a utility decides to adopt this Best Management Practice, the utility should follow the practice closely in order to achieve the maximum water efficiency benefit.

Description

Public outreach and education programs, though not directly related to equipment or operational change, can result in short- and long-term water savings. Behavioral changes by customers will only occur if a reasonable yet compelling case is presented with sufficient frequency to be recognized and absorbed by customers. There are many low-cost or free resources available that can be utilized to implement effective public outreach and education programs. To be effective, water conservation education and outreach should be planned and implemented in a consistent and continual manner.

The goal is customer education about the overall picture of water resources in the community. This includes how conservation is important for meeting the goals of managing and sustaining existing water supplies and avoiding or delaying building of new facilities. Equally important, the program will provide information on specific actions and measures the customers should take to implement these community goals. Showing customers the results of those actions can encourage greater participation in conservation efforts.

An early step in developing of the public information program is to identify target audiences and what messages need to be conveyed. Themes should be selected that convey the importance of water conservation and provide customers an opportunity to act (for example, replacing an old toilet with a high efficiency toilet for substantial daily water savings). Thematic messages that stress the importance of water as a natural resource can be linked with specific tips or water conserving activities. The most successful public information campaigns also promote opportunities for customers to participate in utility programs such as retrofit or rebate programs.

There are a variety of tools that can be effectively used to communicate water conservation to the public. When starting a program within a small utility, there is often limited budget to work with but low-cost effective resources are available. They include print and electronic media; community events such as spring clean-up days, public library events; the school district;

collaboration with community groups such as Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, gardening clubs, and staff within the utility or municipality; and state or federal agencies.

Print media activities can include articles on internal publications such as utility bill stuffers, the actual water bill, and employee newsletters; or externally by submitting articles to homeowner association newsletters or other local group newsletters. Printed material, specifically door hangers, can be left by meter readers to target specific neighborhoods. The Texas Water Development Board and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality are good resources for low cost, pre-printed brochures, landscaping guides, and handouts.

An internet presence is crucial, as more and more residents turn to electronic media to locate information. A comprehensive website with dedicated pages to water conservation, broken down into various subsections such as indoor use, outdoor use, rainwater harvesting, irrigation, appliances, graywater, landscaping, and other relevant topics is an invaluable tool that is relatively easy to maintain, edit, and expand on as needed. Websites offer an easy means to direct residents to other resources regarding water conservation such as the Texas Water Development Board, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Texas AgriLife Extension, Water IQ: Know Your Water, and the WaterSense program. Creating an electronic newsletter to send out seasonal water conservation facts or reminders is possible to do with email addresses collected from the billing department. Social media applications, such as Facebook and Twitter, are another avenue to reach residents. Short educational messages and news stories can be relayed quickly and frequently with no real cost and reach far more customers than a direct mail out.

Community events are good opportunities to directly interact with customers and supply more specific topical information to them. These events could include staffing a booth, presenting special topics to groups as requested, Homeowner Association meetings, and presenting to schools.

Partnering with other utility departments, municipal staff, and local groups that are promoting the same message you are such as master gardeners, master naturalists, gardening clubs, the County Texas AgriLife Extension Agent, river authorities, conservation or environmental groups are all tremendous resources in distributing the water conservation message to larger audience than a singular effort from any one source. Collaborating with other utilities in the area or utilities that share a similar water situation is another way to expand the water conservation program by working together on messages that will target all groups of customers. Joint mail outs, advertising, and products can be paid for by several groups to expand the audience and cost-effectiveness. Creating an environmental or conservation committee that incorporates staff from various departments within the utility or municipality will ensure that all messages are promoted during community events which could include staff from parks departments, watershed protection, storm water management or drainage, forestry, recycling, water treatment departments, development and planning, and energy conservation staff.

Creating a recognition program for water conservation efforts is another successful outreach tool. This can be focused on the commercial customers that perform a water saving measure such as water reuse at a laundry, native landscaping, or efficient irrigation. The positive attention focused on those customers promotes water efficiency to their customers and among their peers or competitors. The award could be a sign on the property, recognition at a city council meeting, or a picture and article on the utility's website. A positive image benefits the company as well as reiterates the importance of water conservation among all customer classes.

Implementation

The first step in implementation is to develop a Conservation Promotion Plan and calendar for the first year. It should focus on what the message will be, when it will be promoted, and what form(s) it will be in. At a minimum conservation messages should be promoted at each season change or quarterly. Collaborate with internal staff in the public information or communications department so that messages will be coordinated with other utility or municipal promotional activities that may be happening. Outreach can also be planned around other national water conservation events such as "Fix-a-Leak" week or "Smart Irrigation" month. The plan should be updated each year thereafter to integrate new ideas and means of conveying the messages. Work with the public information or communication staff to determine if messages are effective in reaching customers; this may involve taking a survey of residents. Revise the Conservation Promotion Plan as needed.

The Conservation Promotion Plan should be a substantial part of the utility's overall Water Conservation Plan. The implementation of the plan should be integrated with the implementation of specific Best Management Practices included in the Water Conservation Plan. A successful public education effort will promote participation in other practices.

Scope and Schedule

Utilities pursuing this Best Management Practice should begin implementing it according to the following schedule:

1. Complete the Conservation Promotion Plan within six months of adopting this practice.
2. In the second year and each year thereafter, complete a revised Conservation Promotion Plan.
3. In the second year and every three years thereafter, conduct and complete a survey of the customers to determine the effectiveness of the message and actions the customers have taken.

The Conservation Promotion Plan should provide conservation information on the Best Management Practices implemented at least four times per year. For utilities focused on reducing summertime peak usage, themes and scheduling of messages should be repeated numerous times during the spring and summer months, rather than spaced evenly throughout the year.

Measuring Implementation and Determining Water Savings

To track progress of this Best Management Practice, the utility should gather and have available the following documentation on an annual basis. This can be completed as part of the Water Conservation annual report that is conducted and submitted to the Texas Water Development Board.

1. Monthly water production;
2. Total population in the utility service area;
3. Number and schedule of activities or information pieces related to promoting specific Best Management Practices adopted by the utility;
4. Number of pieces of information that were conveyed and what form they took (i.e. number of direct mailers, articles in newspaper);
5. Number of activities (presentations, booths, etc.) conducted that year and participants at each activity;
6. Results of customer survey to determine the reach and impact of the program; and
7. Total budget for conservation program and budget specifically for public education information, if applicable.

Water savings due to public information efforts are difficult to quantify. If the public information effort was for a specific action, such as showerhead distribution, the savings can be calculated under this Best Management Practice if the utility did not implement the practice containing the product or action. Water savings for other public information programs that result in specific actions by customers, such as changes in irrigation scheduling or reduction in water waste occurrences could also be quantified through surveys or analysis of water waste reporting.

Cost-effectiveness Considerations

The cost for implementing this Best Management Practice depends on the scope of the public information effort. There may be costs for administration and materials. Within a small utility, the costs will be in the lower range, as the majority of the education efforts will be managed by utility staff. The largest cost will be printing of materials for mail outs, door hangers, or signs along with postage costs for direct mail outs. Internet outreach, collaboration with other groups, and community activities are virtually free from supplemental expenses, as staff time is the largest cost. Purchasing of promotional or give-away materials, such as showerheads, aerators, and dye tablets, is an additional expense that is not necessary to have effective water conservation outreach, though it can enhance a water conservation education program. A comprehensive program would range in costs starting at \$0.25 per customer per year, to several dollars per customer, depending on the budget and utility size.

References for Additional Information

- 1) *Texas Water Development Board:*
www.twdb.texas.gov/conservation/outreach/doc/Public_Awareness_UTILITYGUIDE.pdf

- 2) *Texas Water Development Board:*
www.twdb.texas.gov/publications/brochures/conservation/index.asp
Texas Water Development Board: www.wateriq.org