

6.1 Public Information

Applicability

Any Municipal Water User Group (“utility”) can adopt this BMP. 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. A utility may have already accomplished this BMP if it has a current public information program that meets the criteria of this BMP.

Once a utility decides to adopt this BMP, the utility should follow the BMP closely in order to achieve the maximum water efficiency benefit from this BMP.

Description

Public information programs, even though they may not be directly related to any equipment or operational change, can result in both short and long-term water savings. Behavioral changes by customers will only occur if a reasonable yet compelling case can be presented with sufficient frequency to be recognized and absorbed by customers. There are many resources that can be consulted to provide insight into implementing effective public information programs. Like any marketing or public information program, to be effective, water conservation public information should be planned out and implemented in a consistent and continual manner.

The goal is education of customers about the overall picture of water resources in the community and how conservation is important for meeting the goals of managing and sustaining existing water supplies and avoiding or delaying building of new facilities. An equally important part of the program is to provide data and information on specific actions and measures the customers should take to implement these community goals. Showing customers that the results of those actions have made a difference encourages greater participation in conservation efforts.

There are a variety of tools that can be effectively used to communicate water conservation public education. These include use of print, radio, and television media; billboards; direct distribution of materials; special events such as exhibits and facilities tours; and maintenance of an informative website.

Print media activities can include press conferences, articles and news releases. Regular columns and contributions to gardening and environmental reports are also good ways to reach a wide audience. Electronic media efforts include talk shows, news conferences, press releases, public service announcements, and even paid commercials.

Besides media, utilities can use direct distribution of materials such as inserts or messages on the utility bill, a newsletter, flyers, direct mail, and door hangers. Direct distribution allows targeting of specific messages to specific target audiences.

Special events provide excellent opportunities for direct interaction with the public. These events include facility tours, exhibits, participation in community events, trade shows, presentations to groups, water efficient landscape judging and competitions, and classes and seminars. Development of demonstration gardens and permanent exhibits are also effective.

Websites are now an essential element of public information. Much of the same printed material made available to the media and through direct distribution can be put on a website. Electronically delivered newsletters should include links to the utility's website.

An early step in development of the public information program is to identify the target audiences and what messages need to be conveyed. Themes should be selected that both convey the importance of water conservation and provide customers an opportunity to act. 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 or "market" opportunities for customers to participate in utility sponsored conservation programs such as rebate and/or retrofit programs described in other BMPs.

Each public information program should be tailored to the utility and the community. The types of communication methods most effective for the target audience should be identified. Certain media outlets will be more effective than others. For example, television may be effective for large city utilities where it would not be for suburban or rural utilities. In those areas, a local newspaper or direct distribution of materials would likely be better choices.

There are many publications, brochures, videos, DVDs, etc. already available on water conservation that can be used as published or modified to meet the goals of the utility. The TWDB has brochures and guidebooks available at cost as well as TV and radio public service announcements. A statewide public awareness program is an additional resource anticipated for future years.

Some of the most effective education initiatives involve the participation of customers in the planning process. Creation of stakeholders committees, task forces, or advisory groups have proven effective for utilities in both defining the message and in recruiting allies in the community for promotion of water conservation. Such participatory programs should be well planned and may require an extensive process with numerous meetings or could be a relatively shorter process with representatives of key community organizations. The representative approach could involve neighborhood associations, business groups (i.e. nursery/landscape or other water-related businesses), academic institutions, not-for-profit agencies and environmental organizations among the mix of groups invited to participate. This process will be most successful if public input is sought not only for the public information plan but also for the entire Conservation Plan.

Partnership programs are another effective means of expanding the utility's public information efforts. Numerous not-for-profit agencies include environmental education among their goals. Integrating the utility's public information efforts with programs of other local agencies expands the impact of utility efforts. Other State agencies with offices around the state that include water conservation among their information programs include Texas Cooperative Extension offices, Texas Parks & Wildlife, Texas Soil & Water Conservation Board, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, and Texas Forest Service.

Some business associations, neighborhood associations or not-for-profit groups may also provide partnering opportunities for the overall utility conservation program or specific BMPs. Together with these partners utility staff may be able to develop a speaker's bureau to offer adult education about specific water efficiency related topics such as Water Wise landscaping, irrigation system management, and retrofit and behavioral changes available to reduce water bills.

Another important marketing tool for successful conservation programs is public recognition of water-conserving customers. This is often used to focus attention on commercial customers as an incentive to promote greater efficiency by providing positive coverage of company conservation efforts. Awards or certification programs exist in a number of utility programs in Texas and across the nation¹. These programs have also been used to recognize water-saving landscape designs.

For utilities that are pursuing a number of BMPs, it is important that the public information efforts be integrated with the promotion of implementation of the other conservation BMPs. Promotional efforts or "marketing" of rebates, retrofits, surveys, or educational events should be tied together in the Public Information Plan, much like commercial entities develop a marketing plan.

Implementation

The first step in implementation is to develop a Public Information Plan with goals and objectives and a schedule of activities for the first year and a tentative second year schedule. Forming a committee composed of customers and community leaders can help with the development of an effective plan. Committee members may be directly involved in implementing the plan, such as partnership programs with other agencies promoting water conservation, businesses or residents which implement BMPs and receive public recognition, or providing non-utility volunteers to promote conservation through a speakers bureau. Utilities should take advantage of and coordinate their efforts with State programs on conservation². Another option is using firms that specialize in marketing and public information to develop a public information program.

The goal should be, at a minimum, to provide information to each customer at least four times each year on each action that the utility would like the customer to take. The plan should be updated every year continuing with a two-year time horizon. Every other year, the utility should

survey a sample of customers or consider the use of focus groups to determine if the utility messages are reaching customers and how effective the messages are in terms of customer actions.

The Public Information Plan should be a substantial part of the utility's overall Conservation Plan. Implementation of the Public Information program should be integrated with the implementation of specific BMPs included in the Conservation Plan. A successful public information effort will promote participation in other BMPs

Schedule

- 1) Utilities pursuing this BMP should begin implementing this BMP according to the following schedule: The utility should complete the Public Information Plan within six (6) months of adopting this BMP.
- 2) In the second year and each year thereafter, the utility should complete a revised Public Information Plan.
- 3) In the second year and every other year thereafter, the utility should conduct and complete a survey of customers to determine the effectiveness of its message and actions that customers have taken.
- 4) Every other year, the utility should survey customers or convene focus groups to assist in determining the effectiveness of materials used or to be used in the public information campaign.

Scope

The Public Information Plan should provide conservation information on each BMP being implemented to customers at least four times per year. For utilities focused on reducing summertime peak usage, themes and scheduling of message should be repeated numerous times during the late spring and early summer, rather than being spaced evenly throughout the year.

Documentation

To track the progress of this BMP, the utility should gather and have available the following documentation:

- 1) Number of activities and pieces of information and how many customers were at that activity or received each piece of information;
- 2) Number and schedule of activities or information pieces related to promoting specific BMPs adopted by the utility;
- 3) Number of news programs or advertisements that featured the utility message and how many customers had the opportunity to receive each message;
- 4) Total population in the utility service area;

- 5) Total budget by category for public information; and
- 6) Results of annual or biannual customer survey and/or focus groups to determine the reach and impact of the program.

Determination of Water Savings

Water savings due to public information efforts are difficult to quantify. If the public information effort was for a specific action such as a showerhead distribution, the savings can be calculated under this BMP if the utility did not implement the BMP 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 costs for implementing this BMP depend on the scope of the public information effort. There may be costs for administration and materials. A comprehensive program would range in costs starting at \$0.50 to \$3.00 per customer per year depending on the size of the utility. Larger utilities should have lower unit costs due to economies of scale. The public information program can be developed and managed by utility staff or outside contractors. Media purchases with TV, radio and print media may be done directly by utility staff.

References for Additional Information

- 1) Texas Award Program Examples
 - a. City of Austin Excellence in Conservation Award Program.
http://www.cityofaustin.org/water/wwwssd_iw_award10.htm
 - b. San Antonio Water System Annual Water Saver Awards for ICI Customers and Water Saver Landscapes.
<http://www.saws.org/conservation/>
- 2) Texas Water Smart Program. <http://www.watersmart.org>
- 3) Educational Material on Outdoor Water Conservation, *Does Print Material Translate into Water Conservation Savings?* Kate Soroczan, Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, AWWA Water Sources Conference, 2004.
- 4) *If They Help Write it, They'll Help Underwrite It*, Haring, T., AWWA Conserv 99, 1999.
- 5) *People are Watching – Public Participation in a Reuse Project*, Richardson, A.W., Janga, R.G., AWWA Water Sources Conference, 2002.
- 6) *Providing Incentives for Environmental Performance*, Brown, C., AWWA Water Sources Conference, 2004.
- 7) *Public Participation Methods to Increase Non-Residential Conservation*, Brown, C., AWWA Conserv 99, 1999.

- 8) *Stretching Your Marketing Dollar*, Mark Wieland, AWWA Water Sources Conference, 2004.
- 9) *Tuna Cans, Rain Gauges, and Soil Probes: High-Visibility Campaigns to Reduce Water Use*, DelForge and Platt, AWWA Water Sources Conference, 2002.
<http://www.awwa.org/waterwiser/references/abstract.cfm?id=53276&start=1&kw=public%20information>
- 10) *Water Wise Awards: Incentive Based Conservation*, Bracciano, D., Holland, N., and Brown, S.P., AWWA Conserv 99, 1999.
- 11) *TWDB Education and Public Awareness Page*.
<http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/assistance/conservation/Education.htm>
- 12) *A Consumer's Guide to Water Conservation (video and DVD)*, AWWA, 1999.
<http://www.awwa.org>
- 13) *Conserve Everyday Video*, AWWA, 2001. <http://www.awwa.org>
- 14) *H2O House Water Saving Home*, California Urban Water Conservation Council and EPA. <http://www.h2ouse.org/>