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FRESNO CA
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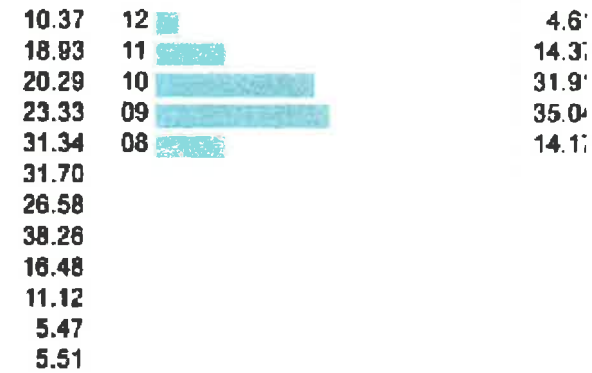
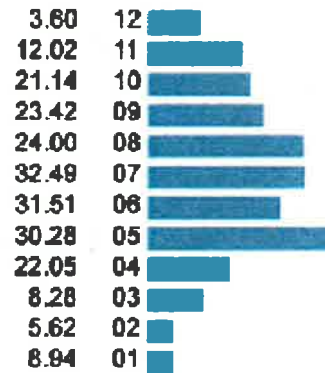
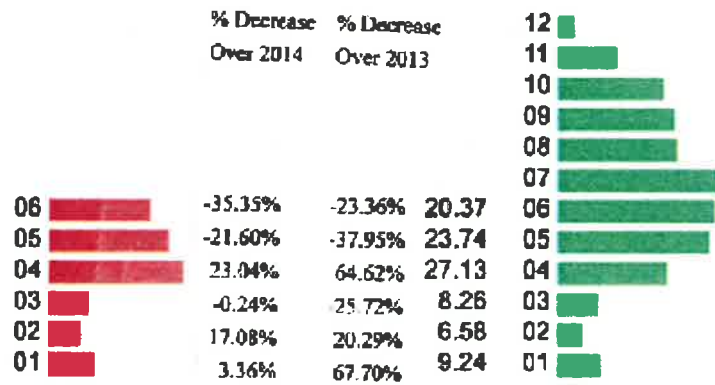
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Insight

EARTH LOG
BY MARK GROSSI

Back off: They're reusing their water



Fresno family builds own gray water system

Saving green space is important for this family

Should city start an incentive program for gray water recycling?

If you see Jennifer Sjoberg watering her front lawn some evening on a no-watering day, stifle your shame-and-snark reflex.

She is spraying water that she already used in her house.

Last Friday when I visited her home just south of Shields Avenue near Van Ness Avenue, she was spraying water recaptured from three loads of laundry. It's a recycling celebration over there, featuring gray water and environmentally friendly suds.

"We use gray water to stay green," says Jennifer, 47. "I'm a big believer in green spaces for

MORE ONLINE

Check out Mark Grossi's blog at www.fresnobee.com/earth-log to read more about water and air quality issues and to share water-saving ideas with Mark.

people, especially for children."

Husband Mikael, 51, a Swedish-born carpenter with experience in plumbing, designed and built the system, collecting used water from bathroom sinks, tub, shower and washing machine. In other words, this man has skills.

So before this goes too far, we

SEE GROSSI, B8



MARK GROSSI mgrossi@fresnobee.com

Fresno resident Jennifer Sjoberg uses recycled water to preserve her green space. Her husband, Mikael, built a water recycling system.

FROM PAGE 1B
GROSSI

need a warning. Don't try this at home without honestly assessing your own skills and researching the details.

There is a state building code for this practice, but city officials told me they don't inspect systems or enforce these rules. They say people should be careful about the work and the type of water they recapture.

What type of water should you avoid? You don't want to hook up to your toilet, your dishwasher or your kitchen sink. The chances of bacterial problems from food or human waste are just too great.

The city warns about using water from a washing machine because there's the possibility of human waste in undergarments. That, too, could lead to bacterial problems.

The Sjobergs recycle their washing machine water because their research showed the problem is often isolated to families with young children or babies in diapers. Adults usually know when their undergarments have waste in them and rinse them in bleach in the

\$600
is what the Sjobergs paid for materials

toilet.

Gray water shouldn't be used on edible plants, and children shouldn't be playing in it. The water should go directly on the ground without any kind of fine mist. The sun's rays kill bacteria quickly, and once the water reaches the soil, it begins a filtering process.

The Sjobergs, who have a 12-year-old son, Kane, say you should also use the gray water soon after you collect it to minimize the chance of bacterial growth.

This isn't some random act of green conscience for the Sjobergs. They're on board with solar energy and recycling of all flavors. In the makeover of their 1930s home, Mikael used wood from Fresno's iconic Cedar Lanes bowling alley.

Fresno's 28% water cutback ordered by the state this year gave the Sjobergs the nudge they needed to do what they always wanted: Create their own gray water system. Jennifer was determined not to let her personal green space die.

They looked at websites

of areas that try to educate people to consider gray water systems. They included San Diego, Santa Rosa and Tucson.

Mikael built it for a little more than \$2,100 — including his labor, barrels, pipes, electrical and other materials. The materials cost, by the way, was \$600. In addition to Mikael's skills, the Sjobergs were fortunate to have a crawl space under their house to give him access to plumbing below.

Gray water goes to two 57-gallon barrels in the ground at the side of the house. Mikael says on average the family is reusing one barrel of water per day.

"We really need to encourage the city here to provide grants or rebates for this kind of project," he says.

Jennifer says she sticks to ecologically friendly soaps and toothpaste from stores such as Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and Target.

She says people should read the labels and ask questions.

"We sit out in the front yard and water by hand with our gray water," she says. "People ask about it all the time. We're helping friends with their own gray water projects. Nature and green space are worth the effort."

As the graph shows we have reduced our water consumption over 21% for May and 35% for June over last year while keeping our lawn green and healthy.

This is because we converted all of our plant spray sprinkler heads to drip irrigation in April and May. In June we used laser drip irrigation instead of spray sprinkler heads for the grass one day a week. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the laser lines take between one and two hours to properly irrigate a section of the grass. It has to be physically moved to each new location. Even with four drip lines running, the entire process takes over 12 hours. It cannot be done properly at night as it is impossible to see where to move it.

So to be even more efficient in saving water I have become a criminal, breaking the council water time rules. In real life we all know that there are exceptions to every rule except death and taxes.

I contacted city utilities and asked for a waiver of the watering time, not changing the day just the time so I can move the lines during the day. I was told that there are no exceptions allowed to watering time rules....

Another home using gray water was highlighted in the Fresno Bee. They are watering their lawn with gray water from their bathroom and clothes washer. The article points out that there is a state building code for this practice but the city does not inspect the systems or enforce the rules.

As a city you are looking the other way when people are violating your rules. Once again you have enacted an ordinance like no trash cans visible in front, no soliciting on the medians and no grocery carts to carry your personal belongings. There is selective enforcement of these rules...yet law abiding tax payers are expected to abide by them.

My request is that you amend the ordinance to give city staff the ability to allow waivers from the rules if the waiver is safe and conserves even more water.

Your option for not allowing staff to issue waivers is having people like me break the rules to save beyond what the rules are intended to accomplish; causing even more disrespect for city regulations. Why abide by your rules when you can't even keep the street in front of my home properly sealed? Do I pay my taxes so you can cite me for doing the right thing?

It is time for common sense to be applied to a one size fits all regulation.

Thank you

George Whitman