

Group focuses on water usage

By Chris Church/Independent Staff Writer

NORTH KINGSTOWN — With summertime just around the corner, not everybody is thinking of barbecues and beaches.

Some local and state officials know that the warm weather means an increased demand on water that can stress the state's natural resources.

That fact was never more evident than during the exceptionally dry summer of 2002, when a townwide ban on outdoor water use was implemented.

The ban cut back the amount of water that was pumped daily to residents by about three to four million gallons, according to Water Director Susan Licardi.

"You turn the tap on and it's magic," she said. "Most people don't think about how it gets there and where it comes from."

Licardi is one of about a dozen state and local officials that make up the HAP Allocation Pilot Subcommittee, which is charged with studying conservation methods for the Hunt, Annaquatucket and Pettaquamscutt rivers.

The group is composed of officials from the state's Water Resources Board, Statewide Planning, the Department of Environmental Management, the Quonset Development Corp., Brown University and the town's Water and Planning departments.

The pilot program in North Kingstown will collect data on the who, what, why, where and when of water usage, especially during the summer months.

Ken Burke, chief of staff and general manager of the state's Water Resource Board, said that once that data is collected, certain policies could be formulated, implemented and evaluated to determine maximum effectiveness.

"This is the ground zero to vet these policies," he said, calling the local aquifer the most stressed in the state.

The most successful policies will then be used to assist in determining a water allocation program for the state.

The town's Water Department will carry out the first step in the process, monitoring more than 2,000 Automated Meter Reader water meters more frequently and determining the relationship between water usage and weather.

The AMR meters allow Water Department employees to check meters simply by driving by a home and reading a radio signal that is transmitted from the meter, as opposed to the older water meters in some residences that require a manual inspection.

Historically, the department checks water meters on a quarterly basis, which Water Department Director Sue Licardi said did little to influence residents to conserve water.

"It takes a full quarter just to read all the meters," she said. "So if you receive a bill on Sept. 1, those residents may be receiving readings from the beginning of June."

This summer, Water Department employees will monitor the AMR meters on a weekly basis and assess the sensitivity of demand to rainfall.

Brown University Environmental Studies Professor Harold Brown said that while the group expects water usage to go up during dry periods and down during wet periods, he is interested to see how big the difference actually is and whether lawn sprinklers on automatic timers help drive up usage even when it is raining out.

At a meeting earlier this month, the subcommittee discussed other experiments that could be conducted to determine the best approach to influencing water conservation.

One suggestion was to notify half of the AMR customers of their water usage by e-mail on a bi-weekly basis to see if that made a difference. Another was to determine the effect, if any, in sending out mailings on responsible lawn irrigation to half of the AMR customers and inviting them to workshops.

"We're narrowing in on demand management, but it's just one piece of the entire water allocation plan that we are trying to devise," Burke said.

This summer, local officials are hoping that residents will be more cognizant of their outdoor water usage because of new water rates that were implemented last year. The new rates, which will be determined by water meter sizes and overall consumption, went into effect last December for a two-year period so officials can determine the effects on customers' bills and water consumption.

Using an "inclining block rate structure," the new configuration creates different rates for residential and non-residential users. It also increases the rates for users who surpass a certain threshold for tens of thousands of gallons pumped and increases rates depending on the size of water meters.

The HAP Subcommittee will meet again on June 12 at 1 p.m. in the Quonset Development Corp. headquarters building at 95 Cripe St.

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