

Turn Off the Water



On April 1, for the first time in state history, California Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. directed the State Water Resources Control Board to implement mandatory water restric-

tions to slash water usage by 25%, reflecting a desperate effort to conserve water and streamline the state's drought response.

We've seen this shift from voluntary to mandatory restrictions before, during the energy crises of the 1970s. Various acts of legislation sought to redefine the country's relationship to energy, from the Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act (passed by Congress in November 1973, at the height of the oil panic) to 1975's Energy Policy and Conservation Act and the creation of the Department of Energy in 1977. Congress set fuel efficiency standards for the automobile industry, and the government adopted building energy efficiency standards. For consumers, in addition to gasoline rationing, a national speed limit was imposed and daylight saving time was adopted year-round in '74 and '75. American households became more conservation-minded, and industries and agriculture increased their energy efficiency.

Public service announcements (PSAs) and advertising, as well as citizen involvement, played major roles in the 1970s energy crises. Bumper stickers admonished people to "turn off the damn lights." Local businesses would post signs that they were "watching [their] watts" by keeping store lighting to a minimum. The Advertising Council began a campaign with the tagline "Don't Be Fuelish," and TV commercials starring actor George C. Scott and Miami Dolphins football coach Don Shula

encouraged viewers to lower thermostats, turn off unused lights and appliances, and drive slower to save energy. Cartoonist Jack Davis sketched illustrations for billboards, magazines and newspapers that showed people practicing various ways to not be "fuelish." Newspapers ads featured cutouts touting various energy conservation messages that could be attached to light switches. A famous PSA from the '70s featured Earth with a gas gauge on it, with the needle moving ever closer to "E," while a Doomsday voice intoned, "If we can put a man on the moon, we can do anything—but can we solve our energy problem in time?"

We've seen a little of this conservationist mentality in the present day, but there hasn't been much in the way of major legislation or federal action on water conservation, and public outreach efforts can be limited in their effects. Water conservation is largely still seen as nice, not necessary, and many parts of the country are still operating as if water is a limitless resource.

It is unfortunate to think that the country may someday face extreme water rationing, as it did for gasoline in the 1970s, but we're heading toward that reality. Taking gradual steps to make water conservation mandatory and not voluntary for consumers as well as businesses and industry can slow down the march toward the brink. It's never ideal to be told rather than asked to do something, but those who remember the gas lines of the '70s might agree that it would be worse to wait in those lines for clean water—we can live without gasoline, but we can't live without water. Can we solve our water problem in time? **SWS**

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