

Stuff You Don't Usually See! Ep. 29 (Jennifer Nations)

Lacey Lively:

Good morning. Today I brought in Jennifer Nations, she's our Water Resource Coordinator, of course, to talk about the hot topic right now, which is the drought and our water. Welcome.

Jennifer Nations:

Thanks for having me.

Lacey Lively:

So let's start it off, what is the status of College Station water?

Jennifer Nations:

So the status of our water is good, the system is holding, but we're just pumping a lot of water every day. Now we've had drought periods in the past before. I've been around, I think, in the blog post I did recently, I said I've been around basically forever, and so I've seen us get into 25 million gallons a day in July, we've had a couple of those days, but we haven't had an entire month of that.

Lacey Lively:

Right.

Jennifer Nations:

And so that's what we've had the past month.

Lacey Lively:

Which is very high usage.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. And I didn't come up with this, but another friend commented that that is 1 million gallons of water every hour of every day.

Lacey Lively:

See, to put it in perspective, I mean-how much.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

And so right now we're not in any kind of strict, mandatory conservation-

Jennifer Nations:

Correct.

Lacey Lively:

... but it's voluntary-

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

... for a College Station. There are other water districts near us that are mandatory-

Jennifer Nations:

Right.

Lacey Lively:

... but College Station right now is still voluntary.

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

... so and what does that mean to you? How would you explain that?

Jennifer Nations:

Right. So what voluntary means is we still want people to just water two days per week instead of like four days per week because that does two things, it helps us mitigate water demand, and it also helps encourage people to do the deep infrequent watering so when you water, you want to really make sure that your soil is moist enough to be able to like stick a screwdriver down into the grass when it's done, and then wait a few days, let your soil dry out some, and then water again. So the schedule that we've given people is odd-numbered addresses water Wednesday and Saturday, and even-numbered addresses water Thursday and Sunday. So right now that's voluntary. So let's say that you have a landscaping service that comes and mows your grass on Wednesdays and it's fixed and they can only come on Wednesdays, well then that's maybe not a great day for you to water. But if you have an odd-numbered address, maybe you water on Tuesday, maybe you water on Thursday, but we still want you to water just those two days a week.

Lacey Lively:

So two days a week, and also don't water between 10:00 AM and 6:00 PM.

Jennifer Nations:

Correct.

Lacey Lively:

And why is that?

Jennifer Nations:

So that is because it tends to be windier during that time and it's very hot so it's not beneficial for your landscape, first of all, and then also you're going to lose a lot of water to evaporation.

Lacey Lively:

That makes sense.

Jennifer Nations:

If you go to the gas station and you fill up your car with gas and then you come home and like half of it's gone, you wouldn't like that, right? So if you run your sprinklers for 30 minutes and half of that water evaporates before it even gets to the ground, why would you want to do that? And I see a lot of properties still... well, maybe not a lot, but I mean more than I would expect.

Lacey Lively:

Right.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

Watering during the day.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

I mean, most of those have timers-

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

... and just making sure to time it where it's two days a week, space that out, and before 10:00 AM or after 6:00 PM.

Jennifer Nations:

Correct. And then the other thing that is difficult sometimes, is difficult to understand, is like I've been talking about a million gallons per hour, 24 hours out of the day, and we've had triple digit days, Shel Winkley has been all over the news and it's been in the Eagle and everywhere.

Lacey Lively:

Historic.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah, historic.

Lacey Lively:

Yes.

Jennifer Nations:

But that is translating into utility bills, like that water went somewhere, right? A lot of it went to... we've had a fair number of water leaks, and then we've been fighting fires, but also we've been irrigating. I understand, I completely understand that it's hard for people to understand just how much water they're using, especially when you go around town. And there are a lot of brown lawns and dead trees and everything is just cooking, but...

Lacey Lively:

Right.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

But that's one thing on your bill, it says it right there on your bill how much your home is using.

Jennifer Nations:

Right.

Lacey Lively:

And that's where you can kind of track it, you can see previous bills to see maybe you have a leak. Maybe there's a leak that happened or there's something going on to look at if you've seen your rate increase. Definitely, Look at that part on your bill.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. Look at the portion of the bill that says mgw, and it doesn't mean a million gallons of water, the M is milli, which is Latin for a thousand, which is great because everybody is fluent in Latin, right?

Lacey Lively:

Negative.

Jennifer Nations:

So, yeah.

Lacey Lively:

Yeah.

Jennifer Nations:

So if it says like 30 mgw, that means you used 30,000 gallons of water, then you can go down to the little comparison box on your bill and you can see what you used last month, and then what you used in the same billing cycle last year.

Lacey Lively:

Okay. So it's all right there on your bill. I apologize, I am not a College Station Utilities customer, y'all made it easy.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. Yeah. We try to make it easy because if your bill is hard to read, then you're not going to understand how your water system works. My bill said that I used 5 mgw for the same billing cycle last year. I don't want to completely out myself, I mean, I did okay, but I'm just going to say it was not five this year.

Lacey Lively:

I mean, yeah. This heat is...

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah, it's nuts.

Lacey Lively:

It is nuts. And I mean, one of the things is that, again, it's voluntary but if you do these little tweaks twice a week on your different address days and between 10 and 6 and really keep an eye on your bill to make sure you don't have any leaks or any problems that would help our everyone's situation in College Station.

Jennifer Nations:

Exactly. Yeah. And if you go out and read your meter in between billing cycles, like now that people are getting their bills for basically like June and July's usage. So we've had 100 degrees and we haven't had... Well, there was that one day that there was .01 inches of rain in Easterwood.

Lacey Lively:

Yeah. Little bit.

Jennifer Nations:

But other than that, no rain.

Lacey Lively:

Right.

Jennifer Nations:

So that's going to translate into higher than expected water use because it has been hotter and drier than it has been in recent years. So they can look at their bill, there'll be a meter reading of what it read

last month and then what it read this cycle. So you can take that and then just go out to your meter maybe a couple of times a week or a couple of times a month and just look at it and keep track of your usage.

Lacey Lively:

Okay.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. I went out and looked at mine. I have a smartphone-enabled irrigation controller so it's really easy to just play with, "Oh, maybe I'll do a few more minutes on this zone and a few fewer minutes on this zone and play around with it." And I looked at my meter mid-cycle and then went back in and cranked everything back because I could anticipate where I was going to end up if I had stayed on that schedule so I was like, "Bring it back."

Lacey Lively:

I love that. Okay. That's a fun fact.

Jennifer Nations:

I'm a water geek.

Lacey Lively:

I haven't even looked at my... No, I like that. I haven't even looked at my meter, but now... because that was your thing like, "Oh, my grass really needs it, can I..." I can actually figure that out on my own a little bit.

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

Be proactive.

Jennifer Nations:

And the other thing I did the other night too was as soon as the... I've been watering in the evenings because there's been a really, really high flow in the mornings. And when it's 100 degrees at 10 o'clock at night, we're not really worrying about fungal diseases in our grass right now. When it gets into September, October, yeah, we'll worry about that. So when the sprinklers came on, I went out and I put out a bunch of coffee mugs in different parts of my grass because I've got a couple of brown spots and I thought maybe it was chinch bugs, which is little tiny insects that like literally suck the moisture out of the grass blades.

Lacey Lively:

Huh. Okay.

Jennifer Nations:

They're awful. And these spots that are dry, I'm going to have to tweak something with my sprinklers because I put coffee mugs around and some of the coffee mugs collected a good amount of water, but then the spots that were dry, there was no water in the coffee mug.

Lacey Lively:

Well...

Jennifer Nations:

So the grass is dry because it's not getting any water.

Lacey Lively:

It could... yeah. And that's another thing that brings up ... Do you have any other tips for homeowners where they can kind of test their sprinkler to be efficient?

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. If you have a hunter brand controller, I've found this out quite by accident, but you can push the program button, it's a little button that says PRG, press and hold it, and the time will start flashing in the display and you can use the plus button to put however many minutes you want. It will go through and run each zone for two minutes, three minutes, however long you put that, and then that doesn't override any of your other normal programming, it's just a test cycle.

Lacey Lively:

Okay.

Jennifer Nations:

And you can just look at everything and see, "Oh, I've got a busted sprinkler head here. Oh, this sprinkler is not working properly." I went to a customer's house earlier this week and they had a sprinkler, a rotor that was missing a piece. And so it was putting out a huge amount of water but it wasn't shooting as far as it needed to and you could totally see like it was nice and green up to this point and then it stopped, and then the grass was really stressed. And then once they saw that, they realized that if they just made a couple of little tweaks here and there they would be able to have that grass in the middle watered too.

Lacey Lively:

And same, make sure nothing's pointing to just be watering concrete.

Jennifer Nations:

Yes.

Lacey Lively:

That's another little thing to look at.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

Maybe something during lawn care, it changed where it's now hitting your sidewalk or your driveway.

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

How often do you think people should check that?

Jennifer Nations:

At least once a month in the summer season. And then even in the wintertime when we're not regularly irrigating, just turn it on and run it like one or two times just to see how everything is working. Sometimes the little fixed sprays, the ones that pop up and just stay put. We love our St. Augustine grass here, right? But it's really thick and it's got those runners and sometimes it'll grow really thick and then the sprinkler heads pop up, but they can't come up all the way because it's covered up by the grass. So yeah, look for sunken heads, look for heads that aren't clearing the grass, look for something that's pointed the wrong way, look for geysers. Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

And then for those that may not know you also do free irrigation checkups for College Station Utility customers.

Jennifer Nations:

Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

And so you can go to cstx.gov/water where we have more conservation tips but also the form where they could sign up for a free irrigation check.

Jennifer Nations:

Exactly. And I've been getting a lot of those. And earlier this year, a lot of the requests that I got were people just wanting to know how their system worked or they would say normally they use 8,000 gallons, and last month they used 10,000 gallons. And I thought, "My goodness, I just love you and I love that you're so interested in conservation," but then I also have people who are using 90, 100, and 120,000 gallons, and those people have not... I've gotten a few requests for irrigation checkups due to high bills, but not as many as I need to have. Like if you're using 100,000 gallons, I don't care if you have like an acre and a lush landscape and a pool, that's too much.

Lacey Lively:

So call you.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. Yeah. Please call me.

Lacey Lively:

Go to the website and fill out a form.

Jennifer Nations:

Please.

Lacey Lively:

And that's a good thing. Yeah. If you have a really high water bill, definitely, there's something maybe off and we need to look into that.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

And we mentioned earlier about that we've had leaks around the town from water main breaks or things because they're dry.

Jennifer Nations:

Right.

Lacey Lively:

The ground is so dry. What should people do if I'm driving around and I see a massive leak in a parking lot or a business, something like that?

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

What should I do?

Jennifer Nations:

Call the dispatch number, it's 855-528-4278. Yeah. I should have that memorized by now. And you choose option 2 to report a water or wastewater issue, and you need to leave a message with your name and phone number and a brief description, address of the property. Or you could even just say, "I saw what I thought was a leak at..." I think somebody mentioned a leak at Forest Ridge Elementary School a few weeks back, and we can send somebody out and check on it.

Lacey Lively:

Because that's a 24/7 hotline. Somebody is looking through those things and dispatching staff to go look. And that's one thing. And that's with anything, wastewater, electric, issues, outages. Problems that you see call that and we have a team ready to help.

Jennifer Nations:

Exactly. And that's really the best and quickest way to do it. You may not get a call back saying, "Oh thank you, Mrs. Smith, we got your message and this is what we did," but we will log the address, send a crew, and get it taken care

Lacey Lively:

See don't tweet it, don't Facebook message it because it's just me in public communications and I cannot send anybody out. So even when I get issues like that, I have to contact dispatch. So definitely use that number. And again, you can go to cstx.gov/water, we have the phone number there we have the irrigation checkup, as well as other conservation tips.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah.

Lacey Lively:

Do y'all have rebates?

Jennifer Nations:

We kind of hit a pause on rebates during COVID, but I'm looking into getting some more rebates. What I would like to do is be able to offer rebates for sprinkler system equipment something like switching to a more efficient type of nozzle or switching to a smart controller or something like that.

Lacey Lively:

So that's to be announced.

Jennifer Nations:

To be announced.

Lacey Lively:

To be announced.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Lacey Lively:

I jumped the gun on that one.

Jennifer Nations:

That's okay. That's okay.

Lacey Lively:

Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about or let our customers know?

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. People can go to Bwatersmart.tamu.edu and sign up for weekly watering emails. And those have been pretty much staying the same throughout the whole summer, rotor zones, run them for 30 minutes twice a week, the multi-stream nozzles, which are a little bit more efficient, you can run them for a little bit longer because they're putting out water slower. So the more water the sprinkler puts out, like the fixed sprays, the less time you run it.

Lacey Lively:

Okay.

Jennifer Nations:

Yeah. Because the fixed sprays is like... imagine a little plant like drinking from a fire hose, that's what's happening there. And then the other thing we were talking earlier about Wickson and Wellborn and their restrictions and stuff, primarily we want... our drinking water systems are, and that's when we see water running down the street, that's our drinking water. So we want people to be able to drink it, stay hydrated in this heat, and also it's there for fire protection, water pressure with our water towers, keeping them full is what allows us to keep water pressure up. And so with the very, very high demand that all of the water utilities have had this summer, that's why we've asked people to kind of put the brakes on their water usage so that we can keep those towers full, keep the pressure there, keep the system working as it's supposed to.

Lacey Lively:

That's a good way to end it. This is why water conservation matters especially during droughts.

Jennifer Nations:

Yes. Thanks.

Lacey Lively:

Well, thank you so much for coming in this morning.

Jennifer Nations:

You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

Lacey Lively:

Thanks. And with that, that's Stuff You Don't Usually See!.