

Success Story: Santa Barbara County Water Agency

Weather-based irrigation pays dividends for water agencies, customers

By taking advantage of irrigation management technology that automatically adapts landscape watering schedules to local weather conditions, Santa Barbara County ET Controller Distribution and Installation Program partners have reduced overall residential consumption by 26 percent and are saving their customers hundreds of dollars per year on water bills.

Partners in the pioneering program include Santa Barbara County Water Agency (SBCWA), City of Santa Barbara, Goleta Water District, City of Lompoc and City of Santa Maria.

Serving drought-prone Santa Barbara County, where the average residential property has an acre of landscaping, these partners have developed a number of programs focused on conserving water in the landscape – including the Green Gardener Certification Program, an online landscape watering calculator, a sustainable landscaping guide and demonstration gardens throughout the county – in an effort to provide a stable water supply for local residents.

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– Rory Lang, Santa Barbara County Water Agency

In 2001, after the program partners reviewed a study from the Irvine Ranch Water District about water savings achieved with HydroPoint Data Systems’ WeatherTRAK irrigation controller, Santa Barbara County became the first region in the state to obtain a Water Use Efficiency Grant from the CALFED Bay Delta program to implement a wide-spread distribution program for the weather-based irrigation technology.

WeatherTRAK®-enabled controllers, now available from The Toro Company and Irritrol Systems in addition to HydroPoint, all include Scheduling Engine™ irrigation software, ET Everywhere™ service and proactive customer service to ensure maximum water savings. The controllers automate watering schedules according to landscape-specific parameters, including sprinkler type, plant material, soil type and slope angle.

These schedules are then dynamically adjusted via wireless transmissions of ET information. WeatherTRAK uses daily weather data to ensure that landscapes receive the right amount of water according to actual climate conditions. By eliminating overwatering, the system delivers substantial water savings and dramatically reduces landscape water runoff.

“Over 70 percent of our water consumption is for residential uses, about half of it for landscaping, so we are always looking for effective ways to increase landscape water use efficiency, minimize residential runoff pollution, and achieve sustainable water use savings,” said Rory Lang, Water Agency Program Specialist Senior for SBCWA. “We selected WeatherTRAK because it addresses these problems at the point of use with a solution that is easy for customers to use, scientifically proven, and offers a rapid return on investment.”

Using funding from the grant, the program partners teamed up with HydroPoint to roll out a program to encourage installation of the WeatherTRAK controllers. The program partners identified the heaviest water users, educated them about the benefits of reducing water usage, and offered a cost-sharing program for installation. Under the program, selected property owners would receive free WeatherTRAK controllers along with a voucher to cover the estimated \$100 cost of installation. For their part, homeowners were asked to pay \$144 for three years' worth of WeatherTRAK ET Everywhere service, which transmits detailed weather updates to each controller daily.

To kick off the program in April 2002, the team sent a letter to the top residential water users in Santa Barbara County, held workshops to train local landscapers on installing the system, and installed demonstration systems at the Santa Barbara Train Station, the Goleta Water District's Demonstration Garden, and a residence in nearby Lompoc. Licensed landscape contractors from ten landscaping firms in the area were trained to install the product, and customers were invited to see the system in operation.

As the team responded to customer requests for installations, they conducted prequalification visits to each property to ensure that it already had an existing automated watering system, that the system had no leaks or flow problems or that these would be repaired prior to installation, and to collect the data required for programming the controller.

Based on savings calculated since installation began in mid-2002, the total cost of the system returns its investment in one to five years (depending on the size of the property) by saving homeowners from \$50 to over \$500 per year in water costs. The program partners have installed nearly two-thirds of the 300 WeatherTRAK systems provided under the grant, and homeowners using the system have reduced their overall water usage by an average of 26 percent in normal weather year conditions and 16 percent in extremely dry weather year conditions.

"WeatherTRAK's experienced staff provided essential support to our program," said Rory Lang. "With the WeatherTRAK team handling customers' questions and educating landscape contractors, the program is achieving significant and sustained water savings."

In addition, the weather-based WeatherTRAK controller has made work easier for the landscape contractors who install and maintain it. "Because the system is self-adjusting, we no longer have to visit our customers' homes just to reset the irrigation schedule," said Lalo Mora, president of Enviroscaping. "We can also maintain more consistently beautiful landscaping because the irrigation levels are exactly what they should be. The bottom line is that customers get a better-looking property at a lower cost, and it's easier for landscapers to keep it that way." ■

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