

Despite drought, some Valley cities still lack water meters

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Water meters reduce consumption because customers pay by volume

Most cities that have unmetered connections have a program to install water meters

All urban water users must have meters by 2025



City employee Manuel Ramirez installs a water meter in Kerman.

Thousands of homes, businesses and apartments in the drought-stricken central San Joaquin Valley lack water meters, complicating efforts by city officials to reduce consumption as mandated by the state.

“How do you tell who’s using too much water?” asked Kerman public works director Ken Moore.

Fresno and Visalia are fully metered, but many smaller cities still have large numbers of unmetered connections.

While Kerman, Chowchilla, Selma, Madera and Kingsburg have launched programs to get as many connections metered as possible, other towns are stymied by the high cost.

By state law, all urban water hookups in California must be metered by 2025, and the drought is prompting some communities to speed up their programs.

In Selma, California Water Service installed 1,000 meters this year and had planned to delay installing the remaining meters until next year.

“Due to drought, however, we now plan to install 500 more this year and the remaining 1,000 by the end of 2016,” said Cal Water spokeswoman Yvonne Kingman.

Valley cities must reduce consumption by 28% to 36% under State Water Resources Control Board drought mandates.

Selma, for instance, must conserve by 32%.

Meters are a proven weapon in the battle against the drought.

In Fresno, overall per capita use dropped 22% after meters were installed between 2009 and 2014, and per capita household water use dropped even more.

In Visalia, household water use fell by 17% after meters went in, California Water Service said.

Kerman, where 39% of water connections lack meters, must reduce water consumption by 32%.

Starting next spring or possibly as early as this fall, Kerman will install meters on half of its unmetered connections. A Proposition 84 grant of \$724,934 and matching city funds are paying for the \$1 million project.

Unlike in some cities that have launched water meter installation projects, residential bills in Kerman won't get a surcharge, because water division reserves are covering the city's share.

WE NEED TO REDUCE 32%. IT'LL BE DIFFICULT TO HIT, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE'RE NOT FULLY METERED.

Ken Moore, Kerman public works director

Last year, Kingsburg in southern Fresno County installed 1,400 meters and has only 81 connections to finish the job later this year, City Manager Alex Henderson said.

"Metering was the responsible thing to do in light of the drought and our future water use," and in meeting the 2025 deadline, he said.

Kingsburg must cut water use by 36%.

The water division borrowed about \$1.2 million for the meter installation project. Homeowners can pay in full for the meter — \$500 to \$1,200, depending on the amount of work needed to install it — or put it on the monthly water bill for five years at \$6 to \$14 a month.

Madera, which must cut water use by 28% under the state mandate, is nearing the end of a multi-year program to get all homes metered.

About 12,000 meters were installed in the past three or four years, with about 105 residential connections still to go, the city said.

"We're getting very close," said city engineer Keith Helmuth.

The remaining connections are in gated communities for which the city must obtain written permission from the property owner due to lack of public right of way, he said.

The city issued a bond to pay for the installation, and increases on the residential water bill will repay the bond. It costs about \$950 per meter on a 1-inch pipe, he said.

Madera has observed that after the meter goes in, consumption falls dramatically, but then tends to go back up, Helmuth said.

This may be because water rates are not tiered, he said. The city staff is requesting a rate adjustment that includes tiered rates, which is expected to encourage conservation.

In Chowchilla next month, officials will begin installing 400 meters out of 1,500 that are coming to the city.

The city borrowed \$3.2 million from the state, and affected water bills will go up \$6.51 a month, said Craig Locke, public works director.

The city welcomes metering to help cut consumption in the drought, but there are other reasons to want meters, Locke said.

"There's the conservation end, but one of the biggest reasons is, we can figure out how much unaccounted loss we have," because modern meters can detect evidence of leaks, he said.

Unlike cities that are installing meters, Corcoran, which is 50% unmetered, has no plans to install them — despite the pressures of drought — because of the costs.

“The council hasn’t felt the need to put a burden on the ratepayer,” said Corcoran City Manager Kindon Meik.

Corcoran water bills are already higher than in other cities due to the cost of paying the debt on a water treatment plant that removes arsenic and nitrates, he said.

But the city is looking into the possibility of obtaining a state grant, he said.

Meanwhile, Corcoran expects that tightened water use restrictions — it recently adopted twice-a-week lawn watering — and public cooperation will allow it to achieve the 36% water use reduction set by the state.

Hanford, which must cut water use by 28% and has about 2,500 unmetered connections and no program to get them metered, will also seek state grants, said public works director Lou Camarra.

Clovis has fewer than 500 unmetered connections, and all are in the Tarpey Village county island, said Lisa Koehn, assistant public utilities director. The city will install a meter if the customer requests one; the cost is a discounted \$680 and is paid by the customer.

The city lowers the price from about \$1,000 “to encourage them to get the meters,” she said.

For now, the city has no plans to install the meters and will wait until closer to 2025 to remind unmetered customers about the deadline, she said.

Unincorporated areas — such as London, East Oroshi and Sultana in Tulare County — are often unmetered, but getting the funding to install meters is proving to be a challenge, said Paul Boyer, a community development specialist at Self-Help Enterprises, which helps poorer communities build water systems.

“We’ve been trying to get funding, but have been striking out,” he said. “Our water is relatively cheap compared to other parts of the state. If you do a cost-benefit analysis, it makes it hard for the Valley to compete for those funds.”

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CITIES WITH UNMETERED CONNECTIONS

City	Number of connections	Number of unmetered connections	Percent unmetered
Selma (Calif. Water Service)	6,542	1,500	23%
Madera	13,565	1,320	10%
Clovis	31,662	432	1%
Kingsburg	3,243	81	2%
Corcoran	3,303	1,637	50%
Hanford	16,972	2,506	15%
Chowchilla	3,824	1,487	39%
Porterville	15,576	480	3%
Kerman	3,394	1,333	39%