



Area sweating out long, hot, dry spell

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By Jerry Needham
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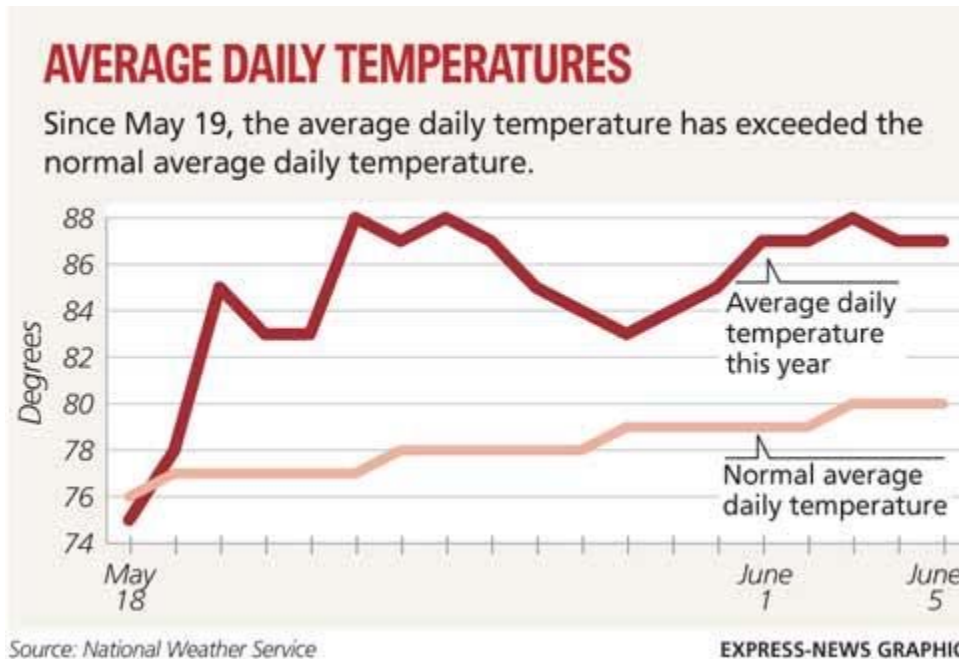
With temperatures and water usage soaring and aquifer levels plunging, officials are urging residents to cut back on outdoor water usage to stave off drought restrictions that limit lawn watering to a few hours once a week.

“People can allow grass to be less than perfectly green and it still retains its health,” San Antonio Water System Conservation Director Karen Guz said.

The city-owned utility's pumps are running almost full time to keep storage tanks full, and work crews are racing from one main break to another in what's shaping up to be one of the utility's worst-ever months for major pipe breaks, spokeswoman Anne Hayden said.

Shifting, dry clay soils combined with huge amounts of water pushing through the pipes are causing the breaks, which numbered 38 in the first three days of this month, she said.

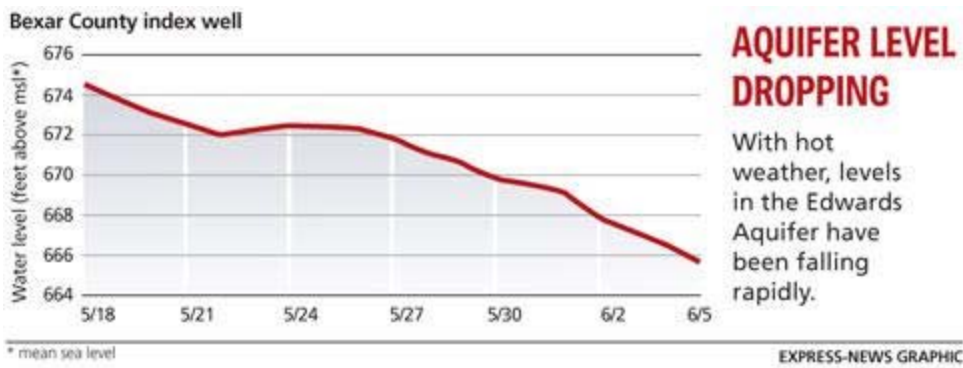
And customers are using water. The utility pumped more than 275 million gallons a day Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and water was flowing at the same rate Thursday, officials said. It's the first time the utility has pumped that much on three consecutive days, officials said.



But the heat has been relentless and rain scarce. Average temperatures over the past month are running about 5 degrees above normal, according to National Weather Service data.

May was the fifth-warmest in San Antonio since temperature record keeping began in 1885. The record 100 degrees reached Tuesday was the first triple-digit temperature recorded at San Antonio International Airport since Sept. 1, 2006.

Rainfall recorded at the airport since last Sept. 1 has been 6.57 inches, only 26.4 percent of normal.



It's the same across the region, resulting in a classification of severe drought across most of South Texas. Parts of Webb, Jim Hogg, Brooks and Duval counties are classified as in extreme drought, just below the worst category, which is considered exceptional.

The hot, dry weather is causing lake and aquifer levels to drop.

The Edwards Aquifer, which supplies 1.7 million people in South-Central Texas with drinking water, was at 665.6 feet above sea level Thursday. That's only 1.9 feet above its historical June average. Its 10-day average was 668.9 feet, which is 8.9 feet above the trigger for regional drought restrictions. It's dropped 5 feet in a week.

Medina Lake, used for irrigation, is 8 feet low, while Canyon Lake, Choke Canyon Reservoir and Lake Corpus Christi all are 2 feet low.

“We've had below-average rainfall, irrigation going on for some time and now with hot weather, we've seen municipal use go up as well, so all those factors combined don't make it look favorable for avoiding critical period,” said Roland Ruiz, spokesman for the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

“Critical period” refers to the time when drought restrictions are implemented.

“We want to encourage people to begin voluntary conservation now,” he said. “Conserving now hopefully can help us delay a critical period long enough to where maybe we get some rainy weather to help replenish the aquifer.”

Guz, with SAWS, said people can't expect to keep everything as green as it was with last year's near-record rainfall and wet summer.

“The good news is that plants in San Antonio landscapes can survive on once-a-week watering, and it will save you money, too,” she said.



Helen Montoya/E-N

Jerome Ferreri waters his plants. He laments the lack of rainfall in the city, which has seen just 6.57 inches of rain since Sept. 1.

Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/environment/stories/MYSA.060608.MAINdrought.EN.36e06e9.html>