

Greenville's Top Water User Increased Water Use During Summer Drought

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In North Carolina today, 86 out of its 100 counties are experiencing extreme drought. And yet, Greenville's top water user, DSM Pharmaceuticals Inc., used just over 13 million gallons of water in July 2007; just two months after an exceptional drought was declared in eastern North Carolina.

DSM Pharmaceuticals is one of five top water users served by the Greenville Utilities Commission, which provides electric, water, sewer and natural gas service to Greenville and 75 percent of Pitt County. Every day, GUC serves more than 135,800 customers. Top water users along with DSM Pharmaceuticals are Pitt County Memorial Hospital, DSM Dyneema LLC, East Carolina University and the Greenville Housing Authority. Each of these five may use millions of gallons of water each month, on average.

June 2007 was the first whole month of water usage after the declaration of the drought in May. And in that month, DSM Pharmaceuticals used 11 million gallons of water, Pitt County Memorial Hospital used 5 million gallons, DSM Dyneema LLC used 2 million gallons, ECU used 2 million gallons and the Greenville Housing Authority used 1 million gallons of water.

At the end of summer and the end of the growing season, little if any water conservation can be noted by any of the top five users, according to Greenville Utilities water use data. DSM Pharmaceuticals increased its water usage by 1 million gallons, leaving it using 12 million gallons of water for the month. Pitt County Memorial Hospital also increased by 1 million gallons, resulting in 6 million gallons of water; DSM Dyneema LLC stayed the same, using 2 million gallons; the Greenville Housing Authority used 1 million gallons, and East Carolina University dropped its water usage by half, using only 1 million gallons of water.

Even though there is no specific way to determine if water conservation is being taken seriously, it appears that there is no decrease in the amount of water being used in GUC's district since the drought was declared. In September 2007, DSM Pharmaceuticals Inc. had a major increase in water usage of about 4 million gallons more water than it used in August.

A drought is an extended period of months or even years when a region notes a shortage in its water supply. Even though droughts can continue for several years, even a short, intense drought can cause significant damage and hurt the local economy.

Gov. Mike Easley called on all North Carolinians to cut water consumption by 50 percent starting Oct. 1, 2007. "It is unusual to find North Carolinians praying for a small hurricane. It doesn't appear that we are going to get one, so we have to act as if we aren't," Easley said in a statement to North Carolinians.

North Carolina has only experienced one other drought period in recent years. Drought conditions prevailed across much of North Carolina from 1998 to 2002, resulting in widespread

record-low stream flow and ground water levels in many areas. Yet, the drought North Carolina is experiencing today “is moving faster than the one in 2002,” described Easley, in his public statement concerning the drought.

Greenville Utilities Director of Water Resources Randy Emery stated, “Since Greenville- Pitt County runs off of the Tar River and the Pamlico Sound we will be last to get hurt by this drought, whereas the Raleigh-Cary area runs off of reservoirs; they need to really worry.”

Every day, people depend on fresh clean water, whether it is to brush their teeth, to drink, cook or bathe. People rely on water to be the highest of quality and safe to use. Greenville Utilities customer and water user Chris Bowen explained, “Since the drought, when brushing my teeth I always turn the water off when I don’t need it and I have limited myself to only one shower per day. And not to mention, this drought has been a perfect reason for me to not wash my truck.”

Water use data on the 100 top water users in the GUC district shows significant seasonal differences. Water usage always peaks during the summer months due to the watering of lawns and water cooling in large industrial buildings. Consequently, water usage drops after the growing season of the fall months ends and into the winter.

One of the most important growing season months is August. In August 2007, 13.3 million gallons of pumped and treated water was used per day in the GUC district. Yet just three months later when the weather cooled off in November, only 10 million gallons of pumped and treated water was used per day.

Some may wonder if the drop was also because of the request for water conservation due to the drought. According to Barret Lassiter, manager of water and waste water for Greenville Utilities, “We have not detected any specific, dramatic forms of conservation by any of our users. The seasonal differences have a huge impact on the amount of water usage each month.”

East Carolina University and Pitt County Memorial Hospital have taken steps to conserve water. Five years ago ECU had wells drilled to use more ground water and less treated water that comes from the Tar River. PCMH followed suit three years later. This has helped in water conservation during the drought, in that both are major water users.

“As such a major hospital in North Carolina, we want to help our environment and community as much as possible. Having the wells dug was positive in all aspects; it was the cheaper route as far as water cost and it cuts back on the water used from the river,” explained Barbara Dunn, director of public relations at Pitt County Memorial Hospital.

Greenville Utilities tries to make its customers aware of ways to help conserve water. GUC advises users to stop watering lawns and shrubbery at homes and businesses, check plumbing to be sure it is not wasteful, check for leaks and repair them, use indoor water wisely, take advantage of free water, avoid washing vehicles and use appliances wisely.

“If the drought persists and conditions get worse, we at Greenville Utilities have a water emergency management plan to start the formal water conservation,” stated the GUC’s Lassiter.

The GUC water emergency management plan consists of three stages. Stage one is called the voluntary conservation stage. It basically asks water users to be wise when using water. GUC prefers water users to cut back on watering lawns, cars, etc. Stage two is the mandatory conservation stage. GUC requests users to only use a hand held water hose when watering lawns, no sprinklers are to be used and cars are to only be washed at a car wash. In this stage, businesses are to submit a plan to Greenville Utilities describing how they are going to cut their water usage by 20 percent. Finally, stage three is a mandatory water conservation stage in which GUC mandates that all businesses cut water usage by 50 percent. Residents of Greenville are to not water their lawns at all and are banned from washing cars altogether.

With no reported rainfall in August and September and only a quarter of an inch of rain in November this drought has been severe. If Greenville Utilities catches anyone breaking the water emergency management plan, it can impose fines. The first fine is a simple warning and a small fee for using water when asked to use it wisely or not at all. There are no criminal charges involved. Yet, after the first fine, if the users still go against the water emergency management plan, Greenville Utilities is able to discontinue service and cut off running water to the home or business.

George Harrell, the associate vice chancellor of campus operations for East Carolina University, told The East Carolinian newspaper that ECU is conserving water as much as possible. “In addition to low-flow showerheads already in use throughout the residence halls, we’re looking into expanding the use of automatic sinks and flush valves,” Harrell told the newspaper.

Meteorologists do not expect the drought in eastern North Carolina to end anytime soon. So it is wise to make a point to conserve as much water as possible. It not only will help throughout the drought but it also will cut down on your water bill. The U.S. Drought Monitor Web site, <http://www.drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>, allows visitors to view and monitor how intense the drought is in your region as well as across the United States.

David Puckett contributed to this story.