

Water districts raise rates as consumption declines

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

It doesn't seem fair – and to some it doesn't make sense.

If you're worried about water bills and you use less water, you should get a lower bill, right?

But that's not happening in the Carmichael Water District.

The district has announced it wants to raise water rates 18 percent starting Jan. 1 – on top of an even bigger rate hike already imposed through mid-2014.

The reason: Water use in the district has fallen below historical average by an astonishing 25 percent, thanks to a mild and wet weather year, foreclosed homes and ratepayers using less water because of rising water bills.

With the cut in use, the water district's revenue has dropped sharply.

It's a curious turnabout in an industry long worried about having sufficient water supply for a growing population.

The state is requiring water suppliers to achieve a 20 percent reduction in urban per capita water use by 2020, a goal established in 2009 that has received plenty of public attention.

Not so well known outside water circles, however, is what it means for the finances of California's water districts, which traditionally have high fixed costs.

"It really wasn't until 2009 that we said, 'OK, everybody is going to try to conserve,' " said Chris Brown, executive

director of the California Urban Water Conservation Council, a group that includes about 130 of California's largest water suppliers.

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