

## NAPA VALLEY REGISTER ARTICLE

### St. Helena set to impose penalties for exceeding water rations

From the [March 25 recap: Napa Valley news you may have missed today](#) series

- [Jesse Duarte](#)
  - Mar 25, 2021 Updated 18 hrs ago
- [Link to Napa Valley Register Article](#)

ST. HELENA — The city is getting ready to impose new penalties for water customers who exceed their rations during St. Helena's Phase II water emergency.

On Tuesday the City Council told staff to bring the recommended penalties back for adoption at the April 13 council meeting.

The new penalties would take effect May 1.

Meanwhile, city officials will develop clear conservation targets and look at adjusting the city's water management policies, including how water allocations are calculated.

St. Helena is the first Napa Valley city to propose a plan for water conservation in response to the dry winter.

The [City of Napa](#) has said it does not anticipate a rationing plan for its customers this year, but advises conservation.

Consultants recommended the following tiered penalties based on how much customers exceed their allocations:

- \$10 per hundred cubic feet (HCF) for water use exceeding the allocation by up to 25%
- \$25 per HCF for water use exceeding the allocation by 25-50%
- \$100 per HCF for water use exceeding the allocation by 50-100%
- \$250 per HCF for water use exceeding the allocation by more than 100%

One HCF, a unit the city already uses on its water bills, is equivalent to 748 gallons.

The proposed penalties would be in line with what consultants deemed comparable cities like Santa Cruz (\$25-\$50), Montecito (\$30-\$45) and Yorba Linda (\$20-\$160) but are far lower than St. Helena's old penalties of \$374-\$1,122 per HCF, which were never implemented.

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#### Water allocations

St. Helena's current residential allocations are 65 gallons per person per day, plus 2,500 gallons per month for outdoor use.

Non-residential customers must reduce their water use by 10% compared with their previous non-drought winter average (December-March).

Those allocations would be aimed at reducing overall water use by 29%, but the burden wouldn't be even across all customer types. Residential customers would be asked to reduce their use by 41%, compared with only 10% for non-residential customers.

Even with the current allocations, Finance Director April Mitts used past water usage data to show how non-commercial users could face massive penalties under the proposed system if they don't conserve, with one unidentified winery possibly being charged \$1.3 million for exceeding their allocation in September, during harvest.

That's because the non-drought winter average is calculated during months when winery water use is relatively low, which doesn't take into account harvest months like August, September and October when water use spikes.

The city could address that problem by tying non-residential allocations to a customer's past monthly or annual use, which would account for the wide variation in water use from one month to the next, by setting a maximum penalty, or by granting exemptions.

Mitts also projected monthly penalties of almost \$4,000 a month for an unidentified restaurant, based on past use. Councilmembers said the allocations and penalties need to be reasonable.

“(Penalties) should not knock anybody out of the game, so to speak,” said Mayor Geoff Ellsworth, adding that penalties should be “manageable” for all classes of users.

In order to assess the fairness of the current allocations, the city needs to calculate how much water St. Helenans must conserve to survive until the next rainy season, Vice Mayor Paul Dohring said.

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“I’m a little worried that we’re not actually conserving enough water over the next several months,” Dohring said. “We really need to get to that number.”

Councilmember Eric Hall agreed.

“Let’s get a target and let’s work towards that target,” he said. “Until we have a target, let’s get something in place right now to begin motivating behavior in the right direction.”

St. Helena’s Bell Canyon Reservoir is at 42% of capacity, with no significant rain in the 10-day forecast.