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El Dorado water rates would reward conservation

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Published Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009

Conservation-minded El Dorado Irrigation District customers would be rewarded with lower bills under a rate plan aimed at reducing water consumption.

"Large users will pay more, and small users will pay less," director Harry Norris said, summing up the rate restructuring proposal board members endorsed Monday.

The plan is not intended to boost revenue, but to distribute charges more equitably among customers, based on consumption.

Also proposed is a "blended" rate schedule, eliminating the higher pumped-water rate charged in areas such as El Dorado Hills.

Customers will receive written notice of the proposed rate changes and have the opportunity to submit written protests. A hearing is scheduled for 6 p.m. March 23 in district headquarters, 2890 Mosquito Road, Placerville.

Adam Lynch, a consultant with Bartle Wells Associates, illustrated the proposed changes using sample bills.

A customer using 3,000 cubic feet of water in a two-month period – the median use for a single-family – would see a decrease of 5.6 percent in their bimonthly bill, or 10.7 percent in areas that pay pumped-water charges.

A customer in the high-use category – 12,500 cubic feet or more – would see increases of 36.4 percent, or 23.6 percent in pumped-water zones.

The examples do not include surcharges.

Agricultural water customers would be required to sign up for the district's irrigation management service by May 2010, or pay a higher rate.

The service, offered without charge, uses sensors to monitor soil moisture to help growers determine when to irrigate crops.

Kirk Taylor, program coordinator, said about half the district's 212 agricultural water customers, representing 75 percent of the irrigated acres, use the service.

District officials said the irrigation management program saves 2,500 to 3,000 acre-feet of water a year. An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre to the depth of 1 foot.

The rate restructuring is required to continue receiving water through the federal Central Valley Project and to qualify for certain grants and loans.

The district expects \$16.9 million in water revenue in 2009. Under the new standards, 70 percent of that amount must come from consumption-based charges. Currently, 53 percent of water revenue comes from consumption-based charges.

Call The Bee's Cathy Locke, (916) 608-7451.