

August and September offered little to no precipitation to the Charlottesville region. As each week without rain ticked away, those of us in the water industry watched tentatively as reservoir levels crept downward and consumption rates held constant. We listened closely as neighboring communities called for voluntary conservation and Governor Warner announced drought designations. Fortunately, October brought with it over seven inches of rainfall and relieved Charlottesville of drought-like conditions.

Other communities throughout the Commonwealth were not as fortunate, as the full effects of drought had already set in by the time the October rains fell. A total of 21 counties in the Commonwealth are awaiting designation from the U.S Secretary of Agriculture as federal drought areas due to reductions in agricultural production caused by drought-like conditions. Fauquier County has already received this designation and seven adjoining counties are designated as "contiguous disaster areas due to drought." This designation will make low-interest loans and other relief available to farmers.

Some Virginia communities such as the Town of Big Stone Gap in Wise County are struggling due to severe water shortages. This town's reservoir is dry and they have been forced to turn to alternative water supplies. They are utilizing water from neighboring towns and have accepted bottled water donations and assistance from the Virginia National Guard. As a result of the water shortage, Governor Warner has declared an open burn ban in the town to reduce the potential for forest fires.

As we watch our fellow Virginians struggle to overcome these challenges brought on by drought, we are reminded of the difficulties we faced in 2002 when our community was hobbled by water shortages. This reminder provides opportunity for us to reflect upon our own usage of water and evaluate how efficiently we are utilizing this precious resource. Certainly a number of us have slid back into old habits. Our shower times have likely crept from three minutes to eight, dish and clothes washers are probably run a little more frequently, and our landscapes are watered more regularly. It is understandable that our water usage increases when we are not immediately affected by drought, after all, water is a fairly inexpensive commodity. What we must remember though is that excessive consumption increases the expense of a product of limited supply. It also places our community at risk of once again facing the challenges we faced in 2002.

This fall, take an opportunity to evaluate your family's water consumption. Check to see that all of your water using fixtures are low-flow varieties. Encourage your teenager to take shorter showers. Save yourself some work by limiting the number of loads of laundry you do each week by running only full loads. And, be thankful that our community avoided the problems that our fellow Virginians are currently facing as a result of this summer's drought.