

# Water crisis may be averted

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The ominous freeway signs warning of a pending Orange County water emergency may be working, as residents were holding the line on consumption, most likely averting a crisis, officials said Thursday.

"Overall, water demand is holding steady throughout the county," said Michelle Tuchman, a spokeswoman for the Municipal Water District of Orange County. "In some areas, the demand has decreased slightly, while in others it has slightly increased. This is good, and we are hopeful that we will be just fine."

Earlier in the week, officials had noticed an upward trend in water consumption countywide despite efforts to stave off possible shortages stemming from the weeklong shutdown of a Yorba Linda water treatment plant.

Expected to remain closed until late Saturday for upgrades, the Robert B. Diemer plant supplies Orange County with half of its water and the southern portion of the county with 95%.

By Tuesday, Tuchman said, the spike in water usage was so pronounced that officials asked Caltrans to activate 35 message boards along the 5, 55, 57, 91 and 405 freeways reading, "ORANGE COUNTY WATER EMERGENCY CONSERVE WATER."

The signs seem to have done the trick, she said, by putting a lid on the spike. "We can now take a look," she said, "and as of Day 5 of our seven-day shutdown, we are in adequate shape."

Though the plant is scheduled to reopen just before midnight Saturday, Tuchman urged consumers to maintain their extra vigilance at least until Monday. "As water comes back into the plant and the facility begins treating it," she said, "it would be helpful if people didn't go running outside first thing Sunday morning to turn their sprinklers back on full-blast."

In addition to the freeway signs, which Caltrans officials said have never been used for such a purpose, Tuchman attributed the success of the conservation effort to various cities and water districts that had implemented such "operational refinements and improvements" as bringing in temporary pumps to help push water to areas where it was needed and increasing the amount of water brought in from other areas.

She said water district officials would be meeting early today to discuss when to turn off the freeway signs. "As soon as we can take them down," Tuchman said, "we will."