

Customers can expect to pay more for water

By Associated Press

With all the questions surrounding the nation's water supplies and systems, one thing seems certain: Customers will be paying more to keep their taps flowing.

Rates have been shooting up nationwide in drought-stricken states and in cities trying to upgrade their aging infrastructure. Experts say the trend is sure to accelerate as the cost of water, treatment and delivery comes into line with how essential water is to our daily lives.

The price for tap water still amounts to about a half-cent per gallon. Elected leaders have long fought to maintain cheap rates, but those prices don't cover the full expense of finding and treating new water sources or upgrading old pumps and pipes.

"The fact of the matter is, water rates are going to have to increase to reflect the cost of having this system that delivers it to every faucet in your house," said Greg DiLoreto, past president of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

The Government Accountability Office said in a report last year that current rates were not enough to pay for the total cost of supplying water, let alone making needed upgrades.

"The fact of the matter is, water rates are going to have to increase to reflect the cost of having this system that delivers it to every faucet in your house."

A year ago, the average monthly household water bill was just over \$34 based on an average usage of 7,480 gallons, according

to a survey conducted by the American Water Works Association. That's up more than 40 percent since 2008, or \$10 per month.

"Compare that to your cellphone bill or cable television bill or power bill or gas bill," DiLoreto said.

Rates have been rising across the country:

- Baltimore this summer saw the last of three annual rate increases that pushed bills up by about 40 percent so the city could upgrade its sewer and water systems. The city has begun shutting off service to users with long-overdue bills, which total an estimated \$40 million.

- New Orleans residents will pay an average of \$115 a month for water and sewer in 2020 after eight years of rate increases that will more than double their bills to reconstruct the city's water-delivery network, which was already aging when Hurricane Katrina flooded the city. As word of the rate increase spreads, more people are asking for assistance through a municipal program that helps pay their water bills. The number of applicants has increased from about 80 per month five years ago to 250 per month this year.

- In Northern California, water rates are scheduled to double in the neighboring towns of Woodland and Davis. The towns decided to build a pipeline to draw drinking water from the Sacramento River because minerals, salts, nitrates and other contaminants have degraded the groundwater.

Water managers say it was clear the cities needed another drinking source.

Davis resident John Munn said he worries that larger water bills on top of the need for money to improve the city's sewer system and repair its roads will make it tough to live there on a middle-class income.

"When you add them all up, I think it's going to hit people

pretty hard," he said.

Many cities in drought-stricken California, including San Diego and San Francisco, also are looking at raising water rates. The reason is a bit of an odd twist: Residents are conserving more water because of the governor's statewide conservation mandate, and that means less revenue is coming into the water districts.

So far, rate increases don't seem to be generating widespread outrage – or even much notice – in the communities that have enacted them.

Bill Stowe, general manager of Des Moines Water Works in Iowa, said he was surprised by the lack of pushback when the utility raised its rates by 7 percent this year. What concerns him is the impact on low-income residents.

"We've got some customers that when you talk about a 10 percent rate increase, that's maybe a decision about whether they can keep their cat or whether they turn up their air conditioning the way it should be turned up," he said. "Those are tough decisions."