

Written by Ron Seymour
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Water conservation measures in Las Vegas have included bylaws against front yard lawns for new homes, a Kelowna audience heard this week.

And only half the area of a back yard at a new home can be covered by turf, said Doug Bennett, conservation manager for the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

The restrictions have been so successful in re-defining what makes a property look new and appealing that many owners of existing homes have voluntarily removed their front yard lawns, Bennett says.

"About 40 per cent of the property owners in Las Vegas have chosen to remove their front lawns and replace the turf with other forms of landscaping that use much less water," said Bennett, who was the keynote speaker at a day-long conference organized by the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Increasing water rates has been another key part of a strategy which has reduced total consumption despite a rapid population increase in the Las Vegas area, Bennett said.

"We want water to be inexpensive when it's being used to meet basic, human needs," he said. "But with rates that escalate based on consumption, people think twice about using excessive amounts."

Kelowna has already undertaken a number of measures that have significantly reduced water consumption in the past 15 years, those attending the conference heard.

Introduction of water meters led to an almost immediate 20 per cent drop in overall consumption, as people curbed their usage to avoid bigger bills, said Neal Klassen, co-ordinator of the Water Smart program.

Progressively higher rates for excess consumption have also been implemented, and next year the city will introduce so-called water budgets for new residential properties based on lot size. If, after a year or so, metering records suggest that too much water is being used for outdoor landscaping at new properties, the owners will be paid a visit by city staff and advised of various conservation strategies.

"We want to come up and help you find out what the problem is," Klassen said.

Fines are possible for the owners of new properties that draw more water than is deemed acceptable under the water budget, Klassen said.