Panic as Cape Town runs out of water

SOUTH AFRICA

Cape Town

For some residents of drought-stricken Cape Town, the prospect of taps running dry is almost too much to bear.

For others, the thought of queueing under the scorching summer sun for a meagre daily water ration will be a necessary evil to keep their businesses solvent.

But the D-day for the taps to run dry, April 12, has been creeping closer — brought forward by the city's excessive consumption despite repeated public warnings.

On 'Day Zero', as it is called, the ordinary water supply will be shut down and taps will run dry.

Residents of the city of four million will then be forced to collect a daily water ration of just 25 litres from 200 water collection points — not even enough for a two-minute shower in normal times.

With about 5,000 families for each water collection point, the police and army are ready to be deployed to prevent unrest in the lines.

Farrel Cohen, manager of the Metropolitan Golf Club in Mouille Point, which is close to the city's World Cup stadium, said he was "too afraid to even think about" what "Day Zero" would mean for Cape Town.

"Nobody knows what to expect — people are running to supermarkets to buy water," he told AFP.

The central business district will likely be spared to protect the economy.



People collecting drinking water from pipes fed by an underground spring in St James, about 25km from the Cape Town city centre last week. AFP photo

But the full impact of a major global city losing its piped potable water supply is unknown.

Reservoirs around Cape Town, in the grip of its worst drought for a century, have gone largely unreplenished for more than three years in the absence of significant rainfall and are about to run dry.

Residents are now ordered to use just 87 litres daily — falling to 50 litres on February 1 — to conserve supply.

A typical shower uses 15 litres per minute while a standard toilet consumes up to 15 litres per flush, according to WaterWise, a South African water usage awareness campaign.

Cancelled trips

Cohen, whose fairways have suffered from the water restrictions, said the realities of life after "Day Zero" were hard to understand.

"We haven't been notified, it is a bit of an unknown," he said.

As well as having to contend with costly limits on their water use, tourists from home and abroad have been deterred from visiting South Africa's 'Mother City'.

"I know many overseas visitors who cancelled their trips because of the conditions," Cohen said.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

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But every day that residents use more than 500 million litres brings 'Day Zero' forward.

And the fall in consumption is hurting the city in other ways with lost revenues from water bills.

Nikita Elliott, the manager of the Cape to Cuba waterfront restaurant in Kalk Bay — a tourist hotspot outside the city centre — is plotting how to keep the business going using only water from standpipes.

"It will be a major extra task and I also think it will be very costly — but business is business, we'll have to do what we can to stay afloat," she said.

Arrogant and shortsighted

The restaurant has stopped serving tap water and instead offers bottled water from Durban on the opposite coast.

It has also erected signs encouraging guests to only flush solids, installed a blockage alarm to prevent burst pipes and now washes dishes by hand rather than machine.

"We've gone all the way," said Elliott. "A lot of business owners and regular citizens have taken this into their own hands and are doing what they can."

Marna Esterhuizen, 40, says she wants the current daily individual limit slashed in half immediately to avoid the standpipe scenario.

"I also think the name-and-shame option isn't a bad idea. The water map shows what is happening in some of the wealthier neighbourhoods and that disappoints me — it is arrogant and shortsighted," she said referring to a council-published list of the thirstiest users.

"I miss a nice long shower in the morning, but now I have a timer in the shower to ensure it is only two minutes long."

But less than half of the residents are adhering to the current daily water usage limit.

"It is quite unbelievable that a majority of people do not seem to care and are sending all of us headlong towards 'Day Zero'," mayor Patricia de Lille said last week.

She slammed transgressors for 'callous' behaviour and said 'Day Zero' appeared very likely.

