



Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA Environmental Column – May 2014 Save Water and Protect Our Creeks – Fix Your Irrigation System

Despite the recent rains, the Russian River Watershed is still in a state of drought. Ukiah has received only about one-third of its average annual rainfall and Santa Rosa has received less than half of average. As of mid-April, Lake Sonoma was only at about three-quarters full and Lake Mendocino was only about half full.

The rainy season is nearly over and it is unlikely we are going to get enough rain to catch up. We all need to conserve water to make our supplies last. Water agencies throughout the watershed are urging residents to reduce water use through voluntary and mandatory conservation efforts. Check with your water utility for specific requirements in your community.

One of the most important things we can do is to eliminate water waste by fixing leaks and other problems with our irrigation systems. It's easy to forget about our sprinklers and drip irrigation lines when they turn on and off automatically with programmed controllers. They run even if we're asleep and even when we're not at home. For most homes in our region, irrigation accounts for almost half of annual water use. Fixing irrigation leaks can save a lot of water.

If your yard is watered by an automatic system, here is a list of things to do to make it more efficient.

1. **Manually turn on each irrigation valve *and look at your sprinklers and drip lines in action.*** Most of the issues will be obvious just by observing the system when it's turned on.
2. **Look for broken sprinkler heads *and fix or replace them.*** For example, sprinkler heads that are clogged and creating pools around them or shooting water up like geysers should be repaired or replaced. If the sprinkler spray is blocked by vegetation, prune the plants or adjust the sprinkler to fix the problem.
3. **Look for sprinklers that are “watering” pavement *and adjust them.*** Adjust the tilt and rotation of sprinkler heads so they are watering plants, not pavement or unplanted areas.
4. **Look for breaks in drip irrigation lines, and missing or clogged emitters; *then repair the leaks or replace the emitters.*** Drip irrigation lines run at low pressure so leaks and breaks often go undetected without this close inspection. Because drip needs to run for a long time to apply water very slowly, a broken drip line can waste a tremendous amount of water.
5. **If you hand-water, *make sure you have an automatic shut-off nozzle on your hose sprinkler.*** A running hose typically uses 7-10 gallons per minute, so make sure every drop is hitting the target plantings.
6. **Look for excess water running off the landscape *and cut back on the irrigation schedule.*** If you have a small stream running down your gutter after your sprinklers have run, you're probably over-watering. If you're causing excessive runoff, reduce your controller run-times.

In addition to checking the irrigation system, consider areas you may want to convert to drip irrigation, especially plantings in narrow strips or oddly shaped beds that are difficult to irrigate with sprinklers. Most shrubs and trees do better with drip irrigation, and the efficiency will reduce water use while also reducing weed growth.



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In addition to conserving water, there is another benefit when you fix and adjust your irrigation system: cleaner water in our creeks and the Russian River. The water that runs off your landscape across parking lots and driveways carries automotive fluids and other pollutants with it into our storm drain systems and our waterways. Landscape runoff can also carry with it pesticides and fertilizers which can be harmful to the water quality in our creeks and the Russian River.

Maintaining your irrigation system and managing your watering schedules effectively saves water *and* protects our creeks and the Russian River.

This article was authored by Cristina Goulart of the Town of Windsor, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.