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Serious About

By Barbara Wichmann

SUSTAINABILITY

Planning ahead to deal with the inevitable shortage of nature's most precious commodity.

It's another beautiful day here in the Bay Area, with clear blue skies and high temperatures even at this early hour. But the flip side to this balmy weather is knowing that California is now in its third year of drought, and drought carries with it a number of far-reaching consequences—some of which you might never consider.

It's not just California that's suffering. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in the last five years, nearly every region of the country has experienced water shortages. This may seem nonsensical when 70 percent of the earth's surface is covered by water. But, only "1 percent is available for human use," the EPA says.

Aside from its ecological impact, particularly on fish and birds, drought has an economic impact. Agriculture is taking a big hit both in terms of jobs and crop yields. According to data from the University of California-Davis, the current drought could end up costing around 14,500 jobs in the state's Central Valley this year—not a good sign for a region that's still suffering from the effects of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008.

People often take water use for granted, but this shortage has revealed surprising impacts. For example, the Lagunitas Brewing Co. in Northern California (the fifth-largest craft brewery in the U.S.) uses water from the Russian River. In a report from National Public Radio (NPR), the company warned that if water levels drop further and it is forced to use groundwater, the signature taste of their popular beers will change—and not for the better. Technology may play a role in providing solutions to "fix" the groundwater, but Lagunitas has more drastic measures on the table, including temporarily moving all production to its new facility in Chicago.

If you like sushi, it may interest you to know that the sushi rice you eat was probably grown in California, as is almost all of the nation's medium-grain rice. According to reports from the *Sacramento Bee*, production will drop by as much as 25 percent this year, and in addition to the loss of revenue, the loss of a huge competitive disadvantage over overseas growers from which exports may never recover.

So, what does all this have to do with small business, you ask? First, as demand for water outstrips supply, costs will rise quickly. The impact will vary depending on what type of business you run, but sooner or later, everyone will feel a hit. Before we descend into doom and gloom, however, let's remember one of my favorite quotes from singer and activist Joan Baez: "Action is the antidote to despair." There's plenty we can do now to protect our businesses and the environment.

Here's how to get started:

- **Get your employees onboard.** Make them aware of the need to conserve water, and encourage them to submit their own ideas for ways to do it. To truly impact change, provide a hub where people can share, learn, and pledge to adhere to new, water-saving behaviors (e.g. taking two-minute showers, cutting down on sprinkler use).
- **Supply water-efficient appliances.** Look for EPA's "WaterSense" labels on any new toilets, faucets, and other fixtures to ensure you're getting the real deal.
- **Fix leaks.** Something as simple as fixing a leaky pipe or tap can save gallons of water each year, which equals dollars saved. Nobody likes a dripping tap, anyway, so it's a win-win.
- **Create a water-smart landscaped area** if you have an outdoor space. There are lots of ideas on the EPA

website, and an online search will help locate companies in your area that can help. You can also use it as an opportunity for an internal team-building project.

• **Reuse your water.** “Graywater” recycling is an old idea that’s coming back into fashion. Capturing rain-water, irrigation run-off, or shower water for re-use are simple ways to

build graywater recycling into your water-saving program.

• **Make sure your dishwasher is water-efficient.** If your kitchen has a dishwasher, encourage staffers to scrape rather than rinse food from their plates, and make a rule that the dishwasher must be full before running a cycle.

• **Conduct a water usage eval-**

ation with your public utility. Many utilities provide this service free of charge, and it’s an effective way to discover new and unseen ways to cut water consumption.

The water shortage is another example of how sustainability and the economy are linked. It is in everyone’s personal and professional interest to rethink their daily approach to this vital commodity, and their appreciation of it. Together, we can all get “water-smart.” ♦

For more information on water sustainability and usage, check out these sites:

<http://www.sacbee.com/2014/05/22/6426140/drought-will-make-cost-of-rice.html#storylink=cpy>

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/02/19/279627234/california-brewers-fear-drought-could-leave-bad-taste-in-your-beer>

<http://www.coolcalifornia.org/article/save-water>

http://www.epa.gov/WaterSense/our_water/start_saving.html



Barbara Wichmann is the founder and CEO of *ARTÉMIA Communications* and a recipient of the 2014 WBENC Star Award.



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