

TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

NEWS

Town's water supply drops unexpectedly

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Officials urging residents, businesses to conserve

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Telluride's municipal water supply comes from Mill Creek, an energetic, splashy stream that courses year-round through steep, wooded terrain northwest of town.

The creek normally meets the town's demands just fine through the cold winter months and high-demand periods, but over the last couple of weeks, the water began to drop unexpectedly to very low levels. It rebounded a bit following this week's storm, but remains unusually low.

The town is in the process of firing up a temporary system that will pump water from downstream back up to its plant, located at the top of Mill Creek Road, to make up for the levels. And while it's not time to panic yet, said Town Manager Greg Clifton, the town is urging people to conserve.

"Any little thing that can be done to help conserve water is good," Clifton said. He urged residents to use less water when doing dishes, try to do laundry less often and take shorter showers. He hopes businesses will take care with the amount they use as well.

The town began noticing decreased flows about 10 days ago, said Bill Goldsworthy, Telluride's plants supervisor. At first officials thought it might be an anomaly, but the pattern persisted.

"I've been here for 30 some odd years and I've never seen it this low in December," Goldsworthy said. The town doesn't measure cubic feet per second on Mill Creek, he said, but it has an 18-foot head gate on the stream, and when water flows over it, the town has water.

"Last week there was a point where it was seven inches below the head gate," he said.

Clifton said that while the town typically leaves more water in the stream than it takes, "the trend in the past few days has been the opposite.

"We have a bit of a decreasing volume there where we could be in a position where we might not be able to meet demand," he said. "It's an unusual event."

Clifton said hydrologists and engineers attribute the drop to a thin snowpack (which translates to a lack of ground insulation) and very cold temperatures.

Mill Creek is fed by a small basin and has no lakes or reservoirs for storage. The town has a backup source of water, the Stillwell Tunnel, but it doesn't flow year round.

This week's snowfall helped the situation — it pushed the water level up enough that it's again flowing over the head gate, Goldsworthy said. Clifton said that a couple big storms should spell an end to the problem.

But with the holiday week approaching, which historically coincides with some of the highest water demand of the year in Telluride, Clifton said conservation is a wise measure.

In the meantime, the town is working on firing up a system of auxiliary pumps and pipes. It installed

the system in 2002 during a drought, and hasn't had to use it since.

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