

The Twin Falls Water Story: More Growth, Less Use

In 1746 among the pages of Poor Richard's Almanac, Benjamin Franklin noted astutely, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water."

Those who are intimately involved in city planning can agree it's best to not wait until the well is dry before understanding the many ways water sustains industry, commerce and the well-being of a population. The City of Twin Falls, Idaho, has made water management a priority for decades. As a result, groundwater consumption has gone down even as their population growth continues at a steady pace.

The History of Twin Falls Water

When exploring the dozens of waterfalls in the Magic Valley including the sprawling, thundering Shoshone Falls, it's difficult to imagine the area as a parched desert.

"The building of Milner Dam around 1900 is really what brought the City of Twin Falls to life," said Brian Olmstead, general manager of the Twin Falls Canal Company. "It turned what was once a desert into the rich farmland that it is now."

The implementation of the Milner Dam and the subsequent canal system were an early result of the Carey Act of 1894. Also known as the Federal Desert Land Act, the act promoted cooperative ventures with private companies to establish irrigation systems that would allow large areas of semi-arid federal land to become agriculturally productive. The Milner Dam project provided water to nearly 200,000 acres on the south side of the Snake River.

"The initial setup included irrigation shares and ditches that flowed to nearly every lot in town until about the 1960s," Olmstead said. "That's when the City of Twin Falls began drilling wells and pumping from the bottom of Blue Lake Canyon to supply water."

With access to additional sources, water became cheaper and more readily available in most parts of town, so the population began to abandon their landscape water ditches and rely more heavily on city water. As the need for city water increased, so did the cost of lifting it from the canyon and treating it. In response, the City of Twin Falls and the canal company began to develop a plan to bring people back on canal water where it was feasible, and provide solutions for new developments that included a combination of both canal water and potable water.

"By 2004, a lot of the city had been built and we used gravity irrigation in the back of people's yards," said Robert Bohling, superintendent of the Twin Falls Water Department. "Those systems were becoming dilapidated and people began using water from their house to irrigate instead. The city recognized they needed to do something, so they enacted a conservation ordinance mandating that any new development would require a pressurized irrigation system."

Olmstead said the use of these pressurized systems along with water scheduling and an increase in the focus of water conservation have led to the overall decrease in potable water consumption.

“Even as we continue to add people, subdivisions and large food processing companies, the production numbers of our drinking water wells have continued to decrease,” said Bohling. “This year (2019) we’ve consumed about 10 million gallons less than what we did 15 years ago.”

The Economic Impacts of Water Conservation

By developing and executing a water consumption plan that can keep up with growth in the Magic Valley, the City of Twin Falls has also created an appealing benefit for businesses seeking to expand or relocate.

“As far as commercial and industrial water are concerned, we’re the cheapest in Southern Idaho,” Bohling said. “Our clean, reliable water sources make it so we don’t have to spend as much money or manpower on treatment, which helps make our rates incredibly affordable.”

The expansive pressurized irrigation network also means companies that are relocating or building from the ground up don’t have to invest a significant amount of time and resources in order to get water where they need it.

“We’ve added companies like Chobani and Clif Bar that can consume a combined 28-30 million gallons of water each month, and we still continue to reduce consumption,” said Bohling.

With new companies come new families that contribute to Twin Falls’ growing suburban landscape. Many of those families – especially those moving from water-deprived regions like California or Arizona – are used to a high cost of water.

“In Twin Falls, you can use a lot of water and not break your budget,” Olmstead said. “You can have a big green lawn and lots of trees at a pretty inexpensive rate, which means you have more money to put back into other parts of the community.”

The Future of Twin Falls Water

The big question behind the Twin Falls water story: is it sustainable?

Bohling said the city is always looking for new sources of water to continue supporting growth. He believes that as long as the community continues to use water wisely, they’ll be successful.

“Analysis and planning are important keys to our success,” he said. “We’re currently going through a pressurized facility irrigation master plan to add new water infrastructure where it may not exist.”

The pressurized irrigation systems in Twin Falls are currently saving the city an average of 6-7 million gallons of water each day. During some parts of the year, that’s almost half of the past potable water consumption.

“Our water supply is copious and reliable,” Olmstead said. “We can protect it by continuing to use the canal water and maintaining our cooperative relationships with the city and county.”

Conservation is a natural outcome when local governments work hand-in-hand with their respective canal companies, but not all cities have that luxury. When cities can't tap into the low hanging fruit of another water resource, they must turn to education.

"Commercials and water inserts in the mail help to get the message out," said Bohling. "It's also important to visit local schools and get conservation information to our kids. They're the ones that are going to be our future and they're the ones who will march home and tell mom and dad to stop wasting water."

Whether you're in California, Louisiana or the high desert of Southern Idaho, water conservation is no longer a choice, it's a necessity.

"Twin Falls understands the value of this resource," said Bohling. "We'll be alright for quite a while."