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Measure Your Hotel's Water Consumption, Then Start Saving.

By Klaus Reichardt
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In a three-week period - Denver was hit with three major snowstorms unlike any the area has experienced in decades

Each one caused the city to essentially shut down. At about the same time this was happening, New Yorkers were enjoying near 70 degree weather, at least 30 degrees warmer than what is expected this time of the year.

Although global warming may indeed be playing a part in this year's crazy weather, scientists say a lot of it is because of El Niño, a weather pattern that has played havoc in North America before. In the past it has brought torrential rains, snowstorms, and unusually mild weather, which is then often followed by one or two years of lack of rain and even droughts.

For hotel properties, these weather changes and fluctuations in rainfall can cause all kinds of problems, many of which can seriously affect a hotel's bottom line, in part because some localities will raise water rates during severe dry periods. Water officials may also implement a variety of restrictions and regulations on water use, again directly impacting hotel properties.

To weather the storms, hotel owners and managers should look for ways to reduce water consumption and make water awareness and conservation an ongoing priority. This not only helps save money but protects this valuable resource.

Baselines and Benchmarks

The first step hotel owners/managers should take in water conservation is to learn how much water their hotel property uses. This varies, but most studies indicate hotels use between 100 and 200 gallons of fresh water per occupied guestroom per day. This averages out to about 36,500 to 73,000 gallons of water per room per year. With water charges in the United States ranging from two dollars to more than five dollars per 1,000 gallons, it becomes clear how efforts to reduce water use can potentially and significantly lower hotel operating costs.

To determine your actual water use, average three or four months of water bills and divide the average expense by the total number of rooms occupied during this same time period. If possible, select months during different times of the year—summer, winter, spring, fall—so that the average of water use and occupancy better reflects annual usage.

It is often a wise idea to try and compare your figures with comparable hotel properties in the same area. If your property is using 250 gallons of water per occupied room while other, similar properties are using about 150, it is an indication that some serious steps must be taken soon. Sometimes local hotel associations or water departments will already have undertaken these evaluations so that you can compare your water usage—and costs—with many other local properties.

With figures in hand, establish a water reduction target goal. This can be in stages with the first-stage reduction achieved just with repairs to existing plumbing fixtures and the implementation of opt-in water conservation measures. The next change can involve the purchase of devices and fixtures that can reduce water usage more substantially.

Stage One: Repairs and Opt-In Measures

Leaking sinks, tubs, and showers can waste tens of thousands of gallons of water per year. It is estimated that one water leak, which might be nothing more than a slow constant drip from a faucet, can waste more than 40 gallons of water per day.

Usually, these fixtures can be repaired relatively quickly and inexpensively. Toilets can be tested by placing a drop or two of food coloring in the tank and then inspecting after a couple of hours. If there is colored water in the bowl or no colored water in the tank, it is an indication that the flapper and flush valve need to be replaced. This test should be repeated regularly, about every three months.

Opt-in water conservation measures include such things as increasing staff awareness of the conservation steps taken at your property. Turn your housekeeping staff into water misers. They are often the most attuned to how water is being used—and wasted—in your hotel. Many properties provide financial incentives for staff members that help achieve water reduction and conservation goals. In addition, they can help by reducing the amount of water they use in the cleaning process.

Guests can participate as well by deciding if they can go an extra day or two before their linens and towels need washing. These programs, now found in large numbers of hotels,

have proved surprisingly successful.

Additionally, a lot of water is used and can be conserved in the laundry. Reduce water levels where possible and program machines to minimize rinse and prewash cycles. Maximize all laundry loads to use water most effectively.

Stage Two: New Devices and Fixtures

If your hotel's toilets and urinals are more than 15 years old, some of the most significant water conservation measures will take affect once these fixtures have been replaced. Older toilets and urinals use 3 or more gallons of water per flush. New, more efficient toilets use 1.6 gallons of water or less per flush, and urinals use about 1 gallon of water per flush.

To conserve even more water, many facilities are replacing conventional urinals with waterless systems. As the name implies, these urinals use absolutely no water at all. Because they do not need to be connected to a water source, they often cost considerably less to install and, because electricity is necessary to pump water in and out of a facility, they are not dependent on water delivery in emergencies or brown out.

Additionally, all sinks and showers should be fitted with water-flow controls. Some 20 years ago, when these devices were first introduced, guests often complained about these controls because they hampered the flow of water so noticeably. However, those made today are even more effective and rarely cause complaints.

Exterior Areas

No discussion of water conservation would be complete without a look at hotel landscaping. To maximize water conservation, especially in dry areas of the country, hotel landscaping should fit the local climate. When the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas was first built, the hotel's landscaping included acres of lush green lawns that required thousand of gallons of water every day. More than half of these lawn areas have since been replaced with plants and landscaping more typical of a desert climate, reducing water usage dramatically.

Additional steps that can be incorporated include:

- Reduce watering frequency wherever possible.
- Stop hosing down sidewalks, entries, parking lots, etc.
- Install irrigation systems on timers to better control water use.
- Place mulch around plants to reduce evaporation and discourage weeds.
- Remove weeds and unhealthy plants so remaining plants can benefit from irrigation.
- Adjust sprinklers so that they cover just lawn and plant areas and not sidewalks and driveways.

Climate fluctuations and growing water demands are taxing water supplies, especially in the western part of the United States. Traditionally, increased water demands have been met by developing additional water supplies using dams, impoundment reservoirs, and canal systems.

However, the dam building era is over due to a combination of financial, environmental, and political factors. What is necessary now for all of us, including hotel properties

throughout North America, is to begin to conserve water. Finding ways to protect this natural resource are many and will benefit us for years to come.

Klaus Reichardt is managing partner of Waterless Co., LCC, a manufacturer of waterless urinal systems and other plumbing supplies and fixtures. He can be reached at klaus@waterless.com.

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