



Water fee increase moves forward to final approval in Reno-Sparks

Bills for most Truckee Meadows residents will go up in 2012 under a plan advanced by the area's primary water provider.

Directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority agreed Wednesday to proceed with a 3.5 percent hike in a monthly service fee billed to customers, with a final decision on the increase expected Jan. 18.

It's an effort to "slowly close the gap" between water revenues and the cost of providing water to 93,000 homes and businesses in the Reno-Sparks area, said John Erwin, the utility's director of natural resources, planning

and management.

The fee increase will raise the average monthly water bill for metered water customers by \$1.42, from \$40.22 to \$41.64. Similar increases are proposed in 2013 and 2014.

The adjustment will raise up to \$6.5 million annually, taking a sizable chunk out of a near \$9 million deficit faced by the utility. Officials hope to make up the rest with yet-to-be-determined cuts in expenditures.

A sour economy largely is to blame for the water authority's fiscal challenges, including a drop in water sales because of flat growth and a housing vacancy rate at more than twice-normal levels, officials said.

A two-prong increase in water rates approved for 2009 and 2010 was expected to raise nearly

\$78 million, but only about \$71 million is expected to be collected.

"We wouldn't be here today if our previous increases had provided what they were supposed to," said Mark Foree, the authority's general manager.

Cooler springs during the past couple of years also have reduced demand for water as residents held off with irrigation.

"April has now become a winter month," Erwin said. "That's all well and good with managing the (water) resource, but we still have to cover costs."

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