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Corpus Christi will likely face emergency water restrictions this fall, staff warns

By **Megan Kimble**, *Staff Writer*

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Birds fly over the Port of Corpus Christi as the sun sets Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, in Corpus Christi, Texas. (Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle via AP)

Jon Shapley/AP



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Corpus Christi will likely face emergency water restrictions this fall, staff warns

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Corpus Christi's residents and massive petrochemical industry could soon be forced to cut water use by as much as 25% amid an historic drought.

City leaders have been scrambling for months to avoid emergency water use restrictions as their main reservoirs have been depleted. But emergency groundwater projects have yielded less supply than anticipated, and staff told city

council during a workshop this week that a water emergency could hit as soon as September.

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“It doesn’t mean we don’t have water,” said Nick Winkelmann, the chief operating officer of Corpus Christi Water. Instead, a stage 1 water emergency means the city is within six months of not meeting demand, which could impact water pressure and quality throughout the system.

“The goal of curtailment ... is to ensure that we always have enough water to meet our demand,” Winkelmann said.



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Corpus Christi's water crisis has drawn national attention, and for good reason – the port is the country's hub for exports of oil and liquified natural gas, and the petrochemical plants that dot the Gulf Coast require huge amounts of water to operate.

In Texas, many have pointed to the city's crisis as a harbinger of looming water scarcity statewide, threatening the state's economy and population growth.

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The September projection assumes no significant rainfall and a 20% reduction in water delivered to the city from Lake Texana starting in August.

The city council will vote next week on the proposed water restrictions.

BACKGROUND: After pivotal vote, Corpus Christi is on the brink of a water shortage: 'The clock is ticking'

Most residents, who have had to comply with drought restrictions since late 2024, won't be impacted. Under the proposed plan, residents will pay a surcharge for water that exceeds a monthly allocation of 5,250 gallons, slightly more than the average household uses in Houston. The majority of residential users – 70% – are already below this threshold.

That means the lion's share of the 15.7 million gallons a day the city needs to conserve will have to come from the petrochemical industry, which uses more than half of the area's water.

Industrial water users will have to curtail use by 25%

Corpus Christi large-volume users average monthly water use in millions of gallons. Under a water emergency, these users would have to reduce water use by 25% from baseline, adjusted seasonally.

Valero				23.19
			17.39	
Flint Hills			18.89	
			14.17	
Lyondell Basell			13.98	
			10.49	
Citgo			12.15	
			9.11	
Celanese		4.89		
		3.67		
Calpine		4.4		
		3.3		
HEP Javelina		2.4		
		1.8		
Coastal Bend Y-Grade Logistics		2.08		
		1.56		
STX Beef		1.6		
		1.2		
Utility Processing (Naval Air Station)		1.16		
		0.87		

Bolded companies are exempt from drought surcharges.

Chart: Megan Kimble • Source: City of Corpus Christi

City staff said large-volume users like oil refineries and chemical manufacturers will be given individual water allocations, calculated as 75% of their historical baseline usage. For example, the Citgo refinery complex uses an average of 4.79 million gallons per day, according to city data. If emergency water restrictions go into effect, the company would be allocated roughly 3.6 million gallons daily, adjusted seasonally.

It's unclear how exactly the city would enforce those allocations. Unlike residents and businesses, many large industrial users are exempt from drought surcharges under a program that started in 2018. That's when industrial users agreed to pay a lower year-round surcharge on all the water they consume instead of a higher one during droughts.

That drought exemption surcharge, currently \$0.31 per 1,000 gallons, was intended to fund new water projects. Critics say companies weren't charged enough to meaningfully contribute to expensive projects like desalination.

That doesn't mean large-volume users are exempt from curtailment. "There will be monitoring, there will be notification, and if the large volume water users do not make corrective action to get back within their allocation, then they could be shut off and removed from the system," said Bob Paulison, the executive director of the Coastal Bend Industry Association, a trade group.

The city didn't respond to a request for comment.

Paulison said companies were actively pursuing other sources of water, including treating plant wastewater and effluent, as well as tapping groundwater. Most plants use water primarily for cooling.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has supported those efforts, Paulison said, by communicating to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality – which permits any wastewater reuse project – “what a high priority these things are.”

Residential users that exceed 5,250 gallons a month could face a \$500 fine and, after a second violation, discontinuation of service, Winkelmann told council.

Shutting off service to residents would be “extreme,” said Corpus Christi Mayor Paulette Guajardo. “I could never support that, to turn someone’s water off.”

In a statement, Hector Rivero, president and CEO of the Texas Chemistry Council, noted that industries in the Coastal Bend region, including oil and gas, petrochemicals, manufacturing, export over \$82 billion in products to customers around the world.

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