

Part 2

How to Deal with a Water Crisis

In a Crisis Mode

Water restrictions are imminent. The buzz throughout your community is that your water board, municipality, county or state government may announce severe actions at any time. You've got to deal with a water crisis.

Note: Merriam-Webster defines **crisis** as
1 a: the turning point for better or worse
2: the decisive moment
3 a: an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; *especially:* one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome.

10 Steps to Managing a Water Crisis

Should a crisis occur, hopefully your business concerns will be represented by a larger community coalition (see Part 3, *How to Form a Coalition*) of greenhouse owners, turf growers and providers, landscape contractors, garden retailers and irrigation contractors, among others. If not, now is the time to start one by reaching out to other green businesses and determine the necessary course of action. The following 10 steps will help you take a proactive stance and avert or minimize a crisis.

Step 1 – Do Your Homework

Begin by arming yourself with facts and figures on the economic impact of the green industry on the local economy and environment. You can request the data you need from your Chamber of Commerce, your state and county governments (economic development) and other credible sources. Analyze the facts, and try to predict the expected results of this “crisis.” Will it harm the environment? Will it hurt business? What will it do the local economy? Will it financially affect the town, county or state?

Step 2 – Mobilize Your Staff, Advisors and Local Coalition Leaders

Build your list of potential supporters by asking yourself the following questions:

- How many people do I employ?
- How many people do the regional green industry businesses collectively employ?
- How many are direct and indirect jobs? (Consider garden center staff, construction workers, administrative and logistics personnel, trucking company employees and third party contractors that perform special services).

Then calculate your overall contribution to the commercial tax base in your area and find someone who can run estimated figures on the following:

- income tax contribution of the direct and indirect jobs
- sales tax generated by the purchase of your goods and services.

Step 3 – Be Part of the “Solution” to the Crisis, Not a Victim

Identify the steps that you, in concert with the community coalition, can do to help avert severe action, or to respond positively once action is implemented. It’s in your own best interest to be a team player, both with your fellow green industry businesses and with local government.

Together with your team, you can define just what your industry is willing to do to help avert a water crisis. You will find that it is more productive to engage in self-imposed restrictions, and encourage the community to do likewise, than to react to someone else’s restrictions. Some voluntary measures that you can consider include:

- employing new and improved watering practices
- installing more efficient equipment
- encouraging commercial real estate and private customers to upgrade irrigation systems
- using drought tolerant species in their landscapes
- launching a strong public information campaign on water-saving practices.

Not only can these activities help your cause, but they can also help establish your group as water-use experts and community leaders.

Step 4 – Create a Plan

Develop an effective strategy that outlines how *you* can contribute to a resolution:

- use best management practices in water conservation
- help educate the public about water conservation
- volunteer to be an “expert” on government panels.

Also include specific steps that designate how your coalition will respond publicly and privately to restrictions:

- define your coalition’s position
- name a coalition spokesperson
- designate someone to represent your interest in non-public forums (e.g., closed-door meetings with elected officials).

Step 5 – Select a Point Person Organization

If you decide not to be the point person, choose someone who can:

- interact with other coalition members
- speak candidly and authoritatively about your business
- represent your best interests
- answer questions knowledgeably about your company.

Make attendance at coalition meetings and conference calls a priority! Your ideas and contributions are invaluable to the group, and it's better to hash out problems or concerns in private than in a public forum.

Step 6 – Name a Coalition Spokesperson

Your spokesperson (or persons) will represent the *overall* goals of your green community to elected officials during water board hearings, to the public during open meetings and to the media.

Remember: *One coalition, one voice, one goal.*

The ideal candidate(s) should be...

- dynamic
- well-spoken
- diplomatic
- knowledgeable.

Tip: If your spokesperson is from a different sector of the green community than you are, it is imperative that you offer detailed, concise, background information about your industry to ensure that your interests are aligned with the larger group message.

Working together will only make your voice stronger and more effective.

Step 7 – Investigate and Analyze Material

Research and prepare current water level data and information that is pertinent to your locale or region. You can obtain this information from a variety of sources. Go first to your state government Web site, and then try the following resources.

- “Drought Information Center.” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). (www.drought.noaa.gov)
- “Drought Information.” United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (drought.fsa.usda.gov/weather.asp)
- “National Water and Climate Center.” National Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). (www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/wcc.html)
- “U.S. Drought Mitigation Center,” University of Nebraska-Lincoln. www.drought.unl.edu/
- “U.S. Drought Monitor.” (www.drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html)
- “Water Watch.” U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). (water.usgs.gov/waterwatch/)

You should be able to download the following information:

- Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) and Palmer Index
- Surface Water Supply Index (SWSI)
- Stream Flow
- Forecasted Weather (short term & long term)
- Other data such as the U.S. Drought Monitor Map.

After you prepare the water availability data, analyze its impact on your industry to determine if it will impact orders of turfgrass, landscape plants or consumer decisions to landscape or irrigate if water use is severely limited.

Some of what you conclude will be “educated speculation.” You may fare better than you think; conversely, things could always be worse. Be *realistic* about the data and what it indicates for the future.

Take a step back, and put the data into context. Prepare fact sheets for the coalition, elected officials and community leaders of influence. Follow your coalition chain-of-command to communicate the information.

Step 8 – Remain Calm

If your analysis appears to be grim during this phase, avoid being divisive. It is a natural instinct to have a “fend-for-yourself” or “survival-of-the-fittest” attitude, but that approach isn’t really in your best interests. Instead, try to focus your efforts and energy on the following:

- Continue to support the coalition agenda, but make sure that your concerns are heard and recorded.

- Stay in control. Make everyone feel secure, but always share accurate information. Otherwise the community in which you do business, including your employees, vendors and contractors, will sense your fear.
- Prepare responses for your employees who might be experiencing uneasiness about their jobs. It is important to acknowledge their uncertainty. You don't want key employees or a critical mass of staff to seek other employment before you've solved the problem. On the other hand, if you feel you may eventually have to let them go, you should give them more than just a day's notice.

Step 9 – Communicate Internally

Weekly staff meetings, e-mails, internal newsletters or memos should be regular components of your internal communications efforts.

- Issue regular status reports to your employees to confer a sense of “ownership” and personal responsibility in the company.
- Communicate regularly, issuing frequent updates to thwart the rumor mill and keep your employees focused on their work.

Step 10 – Benchmark Your Progress

As you move through this phase, closely monitor the coalition's progress.

- Request regular updates on interaction with the local water board, elected officials and pertinent state agencies.
- Request copies of communiqués, meeting minutes and legislation that might directly affect your business.
- Publicly support the on-going efforts of your coalition.
- Follow the coalition's action plan, and request an update on activities.
- Ask for an update on the state and federal resources that are offered to businesses to help mitigate any potential losses. If applying for federal and/or state assistance, request that your coalition press for assistance and help you get the necessary paperwork in order. (The following Web site is also a good disaster relief reference: <https://disasterhelp.gov/portal/jhtml/index.jhtml>)
- File any necessary paperwork, keep track of business losses, continue to monitor water restrictions, be innovative where possible, utilize the power of your coalition and deal honestly with your customers and employees.

This crisis will pass—hopefully without holding your business hostage. Beyond short-term solutions, the coalition's long-term goals should focus on creating and maintaining positive community relationships, while proactively working towards permanent water management resolutions.

One Coalition. One Goal. One Voice.