

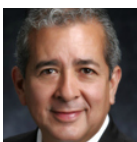


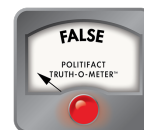
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San Antonio has seen "67% growth" in water customers "in the last 25 years, 0% more water used."

— *Robert Puente* on Friday, September 20th, 2013 in a Texas Tribune Festival panel discussion



San Antonio water customers up 52%, but only used 21% more water 1986-2011

By *Sue Owen* on Friday, January 17th, 2014 at 6:00 a.m.

San Antonio's growth was coupled with an eye-popping statistic during the latest Texas Tribune Festival public policy conference.

Robert Puente, CEO of the San Antonio Water System, said during a Sept. 20, 2013, [panel discussion](#) that the city-owned utility has seen "67 percent growth in the last 25 years, 0 percent more water used."

San Antonio [has been called](#) a "poster child" for water conservation. As it has risen to become the seventh-largest city in the United States, its leadership has used multiple approaches to tackle the water worries facing all of Texas, where the population is rocketing and the future looks dry.

But did 67 percent more customers settle in without using more water?

By phone, Puente said the percentages he aired "need to be updated."

The water system's vice president for public affairs, Greg Flores, told us by email

that Puente's rates covered 1984 through 2009. During that period, according to a chart Flores sent us, the population served by the utility rose from 800,627 to 1.34 million while water produced fell from 191,431 acre-feet to 186,112 acre-feet (an acre-foot is the amount needed to cover an acre to a depth of 1 foot, equal to 325,851 gallons).

That's a nearly 68 percent increase in population served and a 2.9 percent decrease in water produced.

Then again, the cited period wasn't the latest 25-year time span when Puente spoke. Flores said the chart was generated from the utility's [2008 statistics](#).

Flores sent a web link to the most recent edition, the utility's "[2011 Stat Book](#)," and gave us the numbers for 2012, which we used to check the six most recent 25-year spans for which data is available. The 2012 data was not available when Puente spoke at the conference, Flores said, though data through 2011 was. "Compilation of data for a particular year is typically not completed until the end of the following year," he said.

The 25-year spans showed fluctuations partly explained by the weather: Flores noted that 2011 was "the single hottest, driest year in Texas" and said water use remained atypically high through the 2011-13 drought. 2007 was a very wet year for San Antonio, he said.

25-year span	Population served	Acre-feet used
1987-2012*	Up 55.2%	Up 23.4%
1986-2011	Up 51.8%	Up 21%
1985-2010	Up 55.6%	Up 5%
1984-2009	Up 57.6%	Down 0.6%
1983-2008	Up 59.9%	Up 21.5%

1982-2007

Up 69.1%

Down 7.3%

*2012 data were unavailable when Puente made his claim.

The oldest span we checked, 1982-2007, showed more dramatic change than Puente's statement: 69 percent growth and a 7 percent drop in water use. But the most recent span for which data was available when he spoke, 1986-2011, saw a 52 percent increase in customers alongside a 21 percent increase in water used.

That's still not bad, a long-time Sierra Club leader told us by phone.

Ken Kramer, water resources chairman for Sierra's Texas chapter, told us, "It's still very significant. Especially as compared to other major cities around the state. ... It is great that San Antonio is doing this, and it does provide a model for other cities that haven't had that success yet."

The trend statewide is toward less water use, Kramer said. State and federal standards, with such requirements as water-efficient showerheads and toilets, have reduced Texans' per-person water use.

Texas as a whole averaged out to about 151 gallons used per person per day in 2007-11, [according](#) to the Texas Water Development Board, with the state's nearly 26 million people using 169 gallons apiece a day during hot, dry 2011.

Flores said, and the utility's stats confirm, that San Antonians reduced per-person water use from around 200 gallons a day in the 1980s (the utility's stats show the decade averaged out at 197 gallons per day, to be precise) to about 140 gallons a day now (2007-11 average out at 137 gallons per day).

Daily water use per capita for 2011 in Texas' six largest cities shook out this way, according to the water board: Houston, 191 gallons; San Antonio, 148 gallons; Dallas, 197 gallons; Austin, 156 gallons; Fort Worth, 166 gallons; El Paso, 143 gallons.

What got San Antonio saving? "A big federal hammer," Puentes told us.

"Back in the early 1990s, a federal judge actually was going to lay down pumping rules, limit our ability to pump water out of our aquifer, and gave us till the end of the legislative session to pass certain rules that we would impose on ourselves," he said.

San Antonio and nearby areas, he said, were hit by the federal deadline because of endangered species that relied on the Edwards Aquifer.

Flores outlined some of the Alamo City's approaches:

Smarter use of water pulled from the Edwards, including the nation's largest direct recycled water delivery system, routing treated wastewater to users such as golf courses, the River Walk and local industry.

Pumping all the Edwards water it's allowed to every year, and storing what it doesn't use in the Carrizo Aquifer -- which isn't porous like the Edwards, but hard-packed sand, Flores said. The Edwards water sits there, in fact barely commingling with the Carrizo water, and San Antonio has been extracting it as needed for the past three years.

New sources such as a [\\$145 million desalination plant](#) set to start tapping a deeper, saltwater aquifer in 2016.

Not pumping as much water in the first place, aka conservation. The water utility educates users and subsidizes ways to use less, both in residential and commercial systems.

Flores said the utility has approved conservation projects based on the \$400 price to buy rights to an acre-foot of Edwards water for a year. If the project was cheaper than buying the water, the utility implemented the plan.

Giving away 325,000 low-flow toilets, even hiring plumbers to help low-income residents install them, cost less than the unsaved water would have, Flores said. Same for helping Coca-Cola retool to clean bottles with pressurized air.

Last year, though, mindful of the rising cost of water from the Edwards and other sources, the utility raised the ceiling: Now a project has to save more than buying the water at \$1,100 per acre-foot, he said.

Outdoor water usage, Puente said, is the next area of focus, with the utility offering rebates to water customers who want to convert a parched part of their lawn to a deck or patio.

Our ruling

Puente said San Antonio has seen "67 percent growth in the last 25 years, 0 percent more water used."

Those are cherry-picked, out-of-date stats, vintage 1984-2009. Up-to-date figures available when Puente spoke, covering 1986-2011, show that as the population served grew 52 percent, water usage increased 21 percent.

San Antonio may outpace other cities in water conservation. This claim still washes out as False.

FALSE – *The statement is not accurate.*

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About this statement:

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Sources:

Teas Tribune Festival [panel discussion](#) featuring Robert Puente, CEO of San Antonio Water System, Sept. 20, 2013

Telephone interview with Puente, Jan. 9, 2014

Telephone and email interviews, [excerpted](#), with Greg Flores, vice president for public affairs, San Antonio Water System, Dec. 9, 2013-Jan. 16, 2014

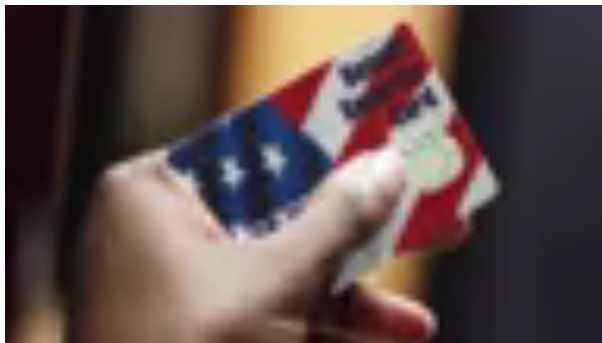
San Antonio Water System, "[2011 Stat Book](#)"

Telephone interview with Ken Kramer, water resources chairman, Lone Star Chapter, Sierra Club, Jan. 13, 2014

Texas Water Development Board [report](#), "Annual Statewide Water Use as of October 24, 2013"

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