

Water Under The Bridge? Knowledgeable Consumers More Sympathetic To Water Companies

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Research carried out by DJS Research Ltd, relating to the recent implementation of hosepipe bans across some of the country, has revealed widely divergent opinions towards the provision of water and the lengths to which people will go to defend these opinions. DJS Research interviewed 504 respondents across the South, South East and East Anglia, who live in areas initially hit by the ban.

Despite being of little inconvenience to the vast majority of respondents – only 3% stated the ban would impact them – awareness of the ban was high, with 94% mindful that they lived in an affected area. However, respondents did not fully understand what a hosepipe ban meant. Whilst 90% understood it to mean not watering the garden with a hosepipe, 73% associated it with filling or maintaining a domestic swimming or paddling pool and 67% with the maintenance or filling of a domestic pond or ornamental fountain. Almost one in ten (8%) said they were likely to flout the ban, however, it may be that more are unknowingly flouting it, thinking it's acceptable to maintain their pond or fill their paddling pool which are not allowed during the ban. Despite, or perhaps due to this lack of impact or understanding, three quarters believed that there should be a penalty for breaking the regulations. All in all, the majority (75%) felt that there should be a penalty for breaking the regulations and almost half of all respondents (45%) stated they would personally inform on their neighbours if they found them acting contrary to the guidelines. Amongst this group, support for a penalty reached 92%, with almost three quarters (72%) believing that a penalty of £1000 is appropriate. This latter figure drops to half (51%) when all respondents are considered. In short, a large proportion of people want to see those breaking the rules punished, and would be prepared to inform the water companies – even with the knowledge that their neighbours would suffer financially. The source of this friction is, potentially, the level of education about the water situation in the UK. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed that "I'm not so sure we're as desperately short of water as we're made to believe". Whilst only a third (32%), of those who would shop a neighbour agreed, nearly half (44%) of those who wouldn't inform on a neighbour agreed, suggesting that those unwilling to shop a neighbour don't believe that the water shortage issue is as serious. Similarly, over half (58%) of those who would flout the ban agreed that we're not as desperately short of water, compared to 36% who would not flout the ban. Problematically, almost two thirds of water customers (64%) believe the water companies are somewhat responsible for the ban, with an additional 30% believing they are completely responsible. The main reason cited by respondents was the amount of leaks that go unfixed. Of those who agreed that they did not need to worry about being short on water, 9 in 10 (87%) also agreed that the water companies had been irresponsible by not saving water to avoid a drought – suggesting that ignorance of the water situation leads to misplaced frustration with the water companies. Though indicative, this research clearly suggests that a large proportion of the public in drought affected areas intend to abide by the hosepipe ban, and that those who are more knowledgeable about water are prepared to assist the water companies in enforcing such regulations. Education about the water situation in Britain is a key method for water companies to increase buy-in among consumers, and those who are more knowledgeable appear to sympathise with the water companies to a much greater extent than those who lack a proper understanding of the availability of water. Despite the relatively dry winter experienced in 2011/12, many respondents continued to blame the water companies' inability to maintain the pipe networks for the drought. Improving the provision of information for water consumers influences their likelihood to abide by regulations put in place to conserve water during periods of drought, and also seems to impact on more general opinions of water companies and their role in the supply of water. As a result, water companies should actively seek to educate their customers about water shortages, how they occur, the actions taken by organisations to avoid them, what individuals can do to help the sometimes unavoidable nature of the issue.