

Best in Class: Smart Practices for Residential Landscapes and Irrigation Programs

CHECKLIST OF SMART PRACTICES FOR PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

This checklist was developed as a resource associated with the *Best in Class: Smart Practices for Residential Landscapes and Irrigation Programs Guidebook*. For more detail and to explore case examples on each program phase and action, please visit the full Guidebook.

Phase 1: Program Development

Identify your organization's drivers and constraints

Effective initiatives are grounded in a clear understanding of organizational drivers and constraints, including regulatory, financial, and operational factors. This understanding helps drive decision-making, recognize opportunities, and set realistic goals. Defining the focus of an outdoor water use program, whether short-term drought response, long-term water savings, or broader ecological health, and aligning it with available resources is essential to making a meaningful impact.

Assess community needs and interests

To create impactful programs, start by understanding your community's unique needs. This may include conducting focus groups or resident surveys, event tabling, hosting community workshops, assessing feedback and participation in past initiatives, and more. This understanding helps tailor initiatives that resonate with community members, in turn boosting participation and helping your organization meet your water savings goals.

Define program goals and evaluation metrics

Identify both qualitative metrics, such as customer feedback, and quantitative metrics, such as water savings, to assess the impact of the program. Also consider how these metrics align with the program's measures of success. Be prepared to collect and evaluate these metrics on a routine basis to evaluate program effectiveness over time.

Define the target audience(s)

Defining a target audience, whether across the service area or within specific neighborhoods or customer segments, helps utilities design outdoor water use programs that maximize impact while using resources more efficiently. For example, a program meant to serve the highest water using customers may be designed differently than a program supporting financially constrained customers. This approach allows for more strategic use of staff time and funding, simplifies participation tracking and outcome measurement, and supports clear progress toward efficiency goals. Targeted programs also avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, ensuring initiatives are relevant to participants and deliver meaningful benefits for both the utility and the community.

Identify barriers to participation and opportunities to enhance equity

Residential customers may face barriers to participating in outdoor water efficiency initiatives, such as high up-front costs, eligibility constraints, language barriers, lack of knowledge and awareness, concerns over aesthetics, and maintenance, among others. By identifying the participation barriers and addressing them in your program design, utilities can enhance equity and increase engagement, ultimately leading to more successful and inclusive initiatives.

Consider multiple benefits and unintended consequences

Shifts toward water-efficient landscaping often bring additional benefits beyond water savings, such as encouraging native plants; supporting alternative grasses or ground covers; providing habitat for wildlife and pollinators; mitigating urban heat and adding shade; improving stormwater management; and enhancing wildfire safety. Conversely, if not carefully designed and implemented, landscape changes may present new challenges such as damage to urban tree canopy or loss of green space. Considering these potential benefits and tradeoffs during program planning can help utilities align outdoor water efficiency initiatives with broader community and environmental goals. Planning for both the benefits and unintended impacts can improve program design and support more balanced, sustainable outcomes.

Pilot and incorporate lessons learned

Starting small with an initiative allows utilities to learn from their initial iterations, which is especially important when focusing on new topics or trying new strategies. By pilot testing, intentionally tracking results, and gathering insights, utilities can refine their initiatives. This process helps to identify if additional resources are needed, if changes to the program structure are necessary, and highlights opportunities for overall improvement in a scaled-up and long-term version of the initiative. Alternatively, pilot testing may lead to a utility deciding not to continue in that direction, allowing it to shift gears based on the lessons learned. Embracing this process of learning and adaptation can significantly enhance an initiative's success and sustainability.

Phase 2: Program Implementation

Provide customer support and multiple pathways to action.

Recognizing the diversity of a community and the various ways to achieve goals is essential for effective landscape and irrigation initiatives. Everyone has a unique understanding of outdoor water conservation, shaped by their values, resources, and personal landscaping and irrigation objectives. Offering a range of programs and multiple pathways to action can foster greater engagement and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Leverage community partnerships

Successful landscape and irrigation initiatives rely on a mix of resources, expertise, and community connections that can be strengthened through partnerships. While few organizations have every skill in-house, collaborating with partners brings specialized knowledge, additional staff capacity, and shared commitment to the cause. These partnerships not only enhance program delivery but also build community trust and engagement. By working with local organizations, industry experts, and other stakeholders, initiatives can be more comprehensive, effective, and impactful.

Engage with landscaping and irrigation professionals

Developing a skilled landscape and irrigation workforce is essential to achieving and sustaining water-efficient landscape transformations. As more communities and property owners shift toward climate-resilient, low-water landscapes, the demand for professionals trained in sustainable design, efficient irrigation technologies, and maintenance best practices continues to grow. Workforce development ensures that these transformations are not only installed correctly but also managed long-term to maximize water savings, protect investments, and enhance landscape performance. Supporting education, certification, and career pathways in this field is a critical component of scaling up water conservation efforts and building climate-adaptive communities.

Offer learning and engagement opportunities

Residents may want to reduce their outdoor water use or make changes to their landscapes, but many don't know where to start. Building understanding around topics like selecting appropriate plants, managing irrigation, working with contractors, or general yard maintenance can help residents feel more confident taking action. By offering in-person or virtual learning opportunities—such as workshops, classes, or community events—water providers can break down participation barriers, offer clear guidance, and support greater participation in landscape and irrigation initiatives.

Pair education and support with enforcement strategies

Clear expectations and consistent enforcement can help ensure that landscape and irrigation programs translate into meaningful water savings. While education and incentives are important, they may not be sufficient on their own to achieve lasting behavior change. Enforcement strategies—such as ordinances, inspections, water waste rules, or compliance follow-up—can reinforce program goals, encourage proper installation and maintenance, and create accountability. These approaches may be especially important during drought conditions, when water providers must implement mandatory restrictions or meet specific water reduction targets. By pairing enforcement with education and support, water providers can protect program investments, promote fairness among participants, and help ensure long-term outdoor water use efficiency.

Phase 3: Program Evaluation

Evaluate and report quantitative program outcomes and savings

Evaluating program outcomes and water savings helps utilities understand whether landscape and irrigation initiatives are achieving their intended goals and delivering meaningful benefits. Tracking quantitative results can inform program improvements, strengthen future planning, and ensure resources are used effectively. Documented outcomes and metrics also help provide justification to leadership, support requests for continued or expanded funding, and demonstrate accountability by reporting progress and impacts back to the community.

Collect feedback from program participants

Collecting feedback from participants helps water providers understand customer experiences, identify barriers to participation, and assess what aspects of a program are working well or may need improvement. Participant input can reveal opportunities to refine program design, improve communication, and better meet customer needs. Engaging participants in this way can also strengthen relationships, increase satisfaction, and support continued participation in water efficiency efforts.

Update programs and implement new strategies

Designing and implementing residential landscape and irrigation programs is an iterative process. Even after successful implementation, opportunities exist to enhance and refine these efforts. After understanding an initiative's impacts through evaluation and feedback, utilities can develop a plan to implement changes or build upon areas of success as resources allow.