

## Our Laguna: Water-saving device being tested locally



Laguna Beach resident Michelle Boyd can regulate the amount of water she uses from the comfort of her own home using the Water Dex device.

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By Barbara Diamond

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A couple of Laguna Beach entrepreneurs are promoting a new gadget they say will help property owners save water and money.

**Grieg Altieri** and **Howard Jelenik** have collaborated to produce the WaterDex, a device that simplifies the adjustment of sprinkler timers to match weather and soil conditions, operated by a remote control.

Altieri is a partner of Rockrose Technology in Irvine, which produced the WaterDex, using wireless technology developed by Cognitive Systems, in which Jelenik invested.

"We were talking to different groups about various applications of the wireless technology, looking for clean, green opportunities," said Jelenik, who has a doctorate in electrical engineering. "We started with vineyards and strawberry fields, measuring moisture in the fields."

Cognitive Systems' wireless technology has been tested in vineyards in Washington, New Zealand and Chili, and the WaterDex promoters first focused on commercial agriculture industry.

"We had been trying to interest commercial growers in the WaterDex, but the water shortage has spurred us to move into the residential market," Altieri said.

The WaterDex will conserve water, and save money and time, said Altieri, a chemical engineer.

"If you are like most homeowners, your sprinkler timer is installed where it is out of sight and out of mind," he said. "While it may occur to you over the course of a year that you should reprogram your sprinkler timers, it's just not convenient and reprogramming the timer is a hassle."

“By keeping the Water-Dex remote control somewhere convenient, you can adjust your sprinkler times whenever you like with the simple turn of the dial.”

Mount it next to the garage door opener, stick it on the refrigerator or place it on desk or counter top.

The WaterDex converts sprinkler timers to into water index-based controllers. The watering index accounts for loss of water evaporated from the soil and transpired from plants. The index guides the amount of water needed without wasting a drop.

Once installed, the sprinkler timer is adjusted to the settings normally use for the warmest, driest time of the year. The next step is acquiring the watering index value for Laguna Beach or wherever you live at [www.waterdex.com](http://www.waterdex.com). Then the dial on the WaterDex remote control is set to match the local watering index value.

And you are good to go — the WaterDex is supposed to do the rest. Still limited in distribution the device costs about \$129. At this time it can only be purchased on the WaterDex website.

The WaterDex is being tested by the Irvine Ranch, El Toro and informally by the Laguna Beach County Water Districts.

“We have no data yet on which to evaluate it, but we hope to know within two or three weeks if has made a difference,” Laguna district General Manager **Renae Hinchey** said.

Hinchey said the district opted to test the device at one residence before deciding if it was a product they wanted to endorse.

The home of Mayor **Kelly and Michelle Boyd** was selected. She heads the human resources department of the district.

“I used to adjust my sprinkler system maybe three or four times a year,” Michelle Boyd said. “Now I dial the remote control three times a week, sometimes daily. It’s that convenient.

“We have used it for two months, and it’s really user-friendly. I just dial the knob.”

Installation, she said, was a piece of cake.

“Three gentlemen came to the house and it took less than 10 minutes,” Michelle Boyd said.

The gentlemen were Altieri, Jelenik and Cognitive Systems Chief Executive **Hank Ortiz**.

Although Jelenik has lived in Laguna for 32 years and Altieri for 10 years, they first met less than two years ago. A mutual acquaintance, **Steve Ewing**, who has an industrial design firm in North Laguna, introduced them.

“Steve had worked with another design firm with which I was familiar, but I hadn’t seen him for a long time until I ran into him at an industrial design for years,” Jelenik said. “He mentioned that he had met Grieg who was looking for an opportunity and we (Cognitive) were doing something interesting.

“We had lunch in town and that’s how it all started.” The luncheon was about 18 months ago, Jelenik said. Rockrose, in which Altieri is a partner, began working on the WaterDex six months ago.

It couldn’t have been better timed.

The water shortage throughout California hit Laguna especially hard, because all of the water in town is imported. The past years of drought and some environmental issues have decreased the Laguna Beach County Water District allotment and increased costs.

Legal restrictions have been placed on the times and methods of irrigating private property by the district and South Coast Water District, which serves residents from Nyes Place to the city’s southern boundary .

“Both water districts continue to plead with residents to be careful of their water usage,” said Councilwoman **Jane Egly**, who reminds residents of the need to conserve water at every council meeting.

And don’t expect the shortage to end any time soon, despite the early rain storm this week and predictions of a wet winter. Firefighters and Hinchey say that it will take years of normal or above average rainfall to restore the water supplies dried up by the drought.

The reduced allotments to the district are further exacerbated by curtailment of California’s share of water from the Colorado River and legal decisions to protect endangered fish in the Sacramento Delta.

“It looks like its only going to get worse,” Hinchey said. “Finding new sources is my mission. If the WaterDex saves water — Eureka!”