Big Brewers Look to Reduce Water:Beer Ratio

EMILY SCHMALL, Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — Some of the largest brewers in the U.S. are trying to reduce their water-to-beer ratio as drought and wildfire threaten the watersheds where they draw billions of gallons every year.

No independent group tracks beer-makers' water usage, but MillerCoors and Anheuser-Busch both say they have made reductions. MillerCoors released a sustainability report Wednesday that shows it has cut its water use by 9.2 percent from 2012.

"Water is just critical to us," Kim Marotta, the Chicago-based company's sustainability chief, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "Looking ahead, we needed to find a way to brew more beer but use less water."

MillerCoors' water-saving effort — focused in Texas, California and Colorado — involves using sensors to release just enough water for irrigation, planting native grass to reduce erosion and runoff and keeping a close eye on leaky machinery in its breweries.

Some craft beer-makers are also working to cut down on water usage while increasing market share.

The number of brewers in the U.S. has expanded to its highest level since the 1870s, mostly because of an explosion of craft breweries. Without the technology or scale of big brewers, craft brewers use on average as much as twice the amount of water for every barrel of beer.

Rahr & Sons Brewing Company, a craft brewer based in Fort Worth, produces about 22,000 barrels of beer per year. Co-owner Fritz Rahr said he does not know how much water he uses to produce each barrel, but says the company employs strategies to conserve water and energy.

"We use a heat exchanging system, which re-captures the heat energy from the brewing process, transferring it back to the new brew water for the next batch of beer," Rahr said

MillerCoors' massive Fort Worth brewery taps 770 million gallons a year from the Trinity River Basin, where tensions among private landowners, municipalities and other stakeholders are rising amid a persistent drought.

While MillerCoors isn't restricted in its water use, residents in the Dallas-Fort Worth-area are. In some cities, residents can't flush toilets from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day and can water yards only on certain days, for example. Three of MillerCoors' eight breweries rely on watersheds with stretched supplies.

MillerCoors is giving out about $700,000 to landowners in the Trinity River Basin that use strategies that reduce erosion and runoff, such as restoring native plants and rotating cattle grazing, according to Trinity Waters, a nonprofit conservation group. That money is in addition to $7 million that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is providing to finance improvements.

Elsewhere, MillerCoors is controlling water use by paying for and installing sensors on the lands of its hop and barley suppliers in Utah and Colorado to control the release of water depending on soil and weather conditions.

After visiting its parent company SAB Miller's operations in Peru and Colombia, MillerCoors executives set up water rooms at its factories in Golden, Colorado, and Fort Worth — nicknamed "war rooms" — to brainstorm ideas for cutting down on water.

MillerCoors' sustainability report released Wednesday shows the brewer since 2012 has reduced water use to 3.48 barrels of water per barrel of beer, or roughly 1 billion barrels of water. The company says its Fort Worth brewery is leading the company's effort, partly by converting wastewater into fuel for its boilers and by recycling the pressurized water used to clean bottles and cans.

St. Louis-based Anheuser-Busch, the largest U.S. brewer, said earlier this month it had cut its water use by 32 percent in the last five years by sponsoring preservation initiatives in water basins critical to its breweries, and by installing U.S. Department of Agriculture real-time weather and crop water-use data meters on suppliers' farms.

The owner of a farm in southeastern Idaho that supplies Anheuser-Busch with barley says the weather meter installed in March is helping.

"Water is really our limiting factor. In fact we're struggling right now," said Clark Hamilton, who owns the 4,500-acre barley farm. "We kind of look to this equipment to show us what we can see physically."

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