



From the Ground Up:

Albuquerque Apartments Realize Savings With Rebate and Retrofits

Project Summary

The property managers at La Paloma Apartments worked with the local water utility, its contractor, and a local landscaping company to replace apartment plumbing fixtures and upgrade the complex's irrigation system. The property saved more than 5 million gallons of water within the first year, and the project paid for itself within two years, thanks in part to the utility's rebate program.

Background

In 2016, property managers at La Paloma Apartments in Albuquerque, New Mexico, examined their water use and realized there were plenty of opportunities for the complex to save water. They contacted the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA) and were connected with the utility's consultant, Smart Use, to identify potential indoor and outdoor water efficiency improvements.

ABCWUA also offered a Water Smart Customized Performance Rebate; for qualifying projects that save at least 100,000 gallons of water per year, ABCWUA provided a rebate of half the cost of the project at a rate of \$10 per unit of water (defined as 748 gallons) or \$50,000, whichever was lower.

Audits and Upgrades Help Apartments Save

The apartment complex's water efficiency makeover started in 2016, when ABCWUA began providing water usage reports to help La Paloma identify seasonal spikes and anomalies in water use. Smart Use then conducted indoor and outdoor water audits to identify efficiency upgrades, predict water savings, and calculate the return on investment for all potential projects. This analysis would be used to secure a rebate.

Smart Use professionals certified by the WaterSense labeled Qualified Water Efficient Landscaper (QWEL) program conducted the landscape audit. It quickly became apparent that the best way to start was with La Paloma's outdated irrigation system and associated runoff issues that resulted from the land's steep slope.

In 2019, La Paloma hired local water-efficient landscaping company Green Summit to upgrade the irrigation system. The firm incorporated system-wide pressure regulation at the valves and retrofitted sprinklers with

Case Study Highlights

- **Property:** La Paloma Apartments (built in 1994)
- **Location:** Albuquerque, New Mexico
- **Landscape size:** 371,422 square feet of irrigated area
- **Number of residential units:** 424
- **Water savings:** Over 5 million gallons of water in 2020
- **Cost savings:** Approximately \$20,000 in water bills in 2020



Sloping landscape made runoff an issue for the apartment complex.

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high-efficiency nozzles. These changes ensure the irrigation system operates at its intended pressure and flow rate for maximum efficiency. Green Summit also installed check valves that keep water in the irrigation system at the end of a cycle, rather than allowing it to drain. These improvements help ensure more consistent irrigation across the landscape and save water that was being lost to drainage and runoff.

Green Summit also installed WaterSense labeled weather-based irrigation controllers (WBICs) with rain and freeze sensors. WaterSense labeled controllers use real-time weather data and landscape attributes to irrigate only when plants need water. Although Albuquerque is relatively dry, the additional rain sensors ensure that the irrigation system will not run needlessly during or after rain.

The property managers also decided to upgrade all apartment units to replace showerheads and faucet aerators with WaterSense labeled models. To gain support from residents, ABCWUA worked with La Paloma to develop communication materials to help residents identify leaks and understand the value of the WaterSense labeled products.

Results

La Paloma saved over five million gallons of water total, both indoors and out, in the first year after the project's completion. The complex also saved more than \$20,000 on its water bills in 2020 and expected to recover its project costs by the end of 2021. La Paloma property managers have plans for ongoing improvements to continue saving water—and money—in the future.

Multiple Partners Made the Multifamily Makeover

It took teamwork to implement these successful water efficiency improvements. After becoming interested in reducing the complex's water use, La Paloma's property managers contacted ABCWUA; they were encouraged to undertake their indoor installations and irrigation system upgrades and ultimately received ABCWUA's Water Smart Customized Performance Rebate for \$41,600—half the total project cost. In addition to the rebate, La Paloma staff were able to leverage Smart Use's analytical expertise and Green Summit's water-efficient landscaping knowledge—a win-win for everyone involved.

ABCWUA was also enthusiastic about the partnership. The utility strives to save water on a regional level in Albuquerque's desert climate, working with multifamily, commercial, and institutional buildings to achieve that goal. ABCWUA had initially found it challenging to connect with multifamily properties, and La Paloma presented a great opportunity to expand into that sector. Smart Use is continuing to monitor water savings at the apartment complex, providing data that will allow ABCWUA to grow its work with multifamily buildings and help La Paloma continue to save water.

Lessons Learned

- **Partner with professionals.** The property managers at La Paloma took initiative to seek out a partnership with the local water utility to conserve resources. ABCWUA employees and their contractor provided input on the design of La Paloma's water efficiency measures, and QWEL-certified staff suggested specific landscape improvements. This combination of interest and qualifications resulted in major water savings.
- **Think long-term.** La Paloma property managers began talking to ABCWUA about ways to save water in 2016—three years before they put a shovel in the ground. The property managers have a five-year plan that ensures their water savings will increase over time.



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- **Don't give up, even when things are going downhill.** The team faced challenges while updating the irrigation system for maximum water savings due to the sloping landscape. Green Summit monitored and adjusted irrigation system components until the system functioned as intended.
- **Spread the word.** La Paloma and ABCWUA prioritized communicating the importance of the water reduction efforts to apartment residents. As a result, residents responded positively to the upgrades and helped support the overall initiative.

Acknowledgements

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Learn More

The WaterSense website has educational resources on water efficiency in multifamily properties. If you're interested in WaterSense labeled products, visit www.epa.gov/watersense/watersense-products and <https://www.epa.gov/watersense/irrigation-controllers>. To learn more about outdoor water efficiency, visit www.epa.gov/watersense/outdoors. To find out more about irrigation professionals certified by a WaterSense labeled program, visit www.epa.gov/watersense/irrigation-pro.

