AUSTIN (KXAN) - Even though Central Texas is expected to get some good rainfall over the weekend, the lack of rain over the last few years has led to water conservation efforts throughout the area.

One of the biggest efforts has been on the University of Texas campus in Austin and the savings is counted in more than just gallons of water.

The biggest uses of water on campus are the cooling towers that provide energy for the campus and the second used to be the irrigation system.

But after making some major tweaks to the system their numbers on the savings are just coming in and the changes have resulted in a savings of nearly one million dollars a year on their water bill.

For years the irrigation crews would manually turn on the water and let it run until they thought the ground had a good soaking.

"Someone is not going to know how much water it needs by just looking at it," said Markus Hogue, Program Coordinator for Irrigation and Water Conservation at UT Austin.

That's also how they checked for leaks or broken sprinkler heads.

"With only four irrigators on only 109 controllers it was very inefficient with our man power," said Hogue.

So Markus Hogue was brought on to create a central irrigation system.

How it works is each zone is now connected to a computer.

A weather monitor determines how long each zone should run and how often.

"That way we water exactly what is being pulled out due to sunlight, humidity, wind speed throughout the day, we don't over water we don't under water," said Hogue.

The computer also alerts crews to leaks.

"We find out within a minute or two, it shuts off the water source, and sends us an alert and we are able to go out in the field and fix the problems," said Hogue.

Broken sprinkler heads used to waste about 10 million gallons of water every year and it could take crews up to a month to even locate the problem.

Now they bring their handheld monitors out, turn on the zone, and pinpoint the break.

And since they can monitor the flow of the water, the device can even determine if there is a leak in the pipe.
“Not all of the breaks shoot up in the air, some are down and it just keeps seeping out,” said Hogue.

In two years the school has been able to reduce its irrigation water use by 66 percent.

“Almost a savings of 100 million gallons of water,” said Hogue.

Last year that amounted to a savings of $800-thousand.

The central irrigation system cost $2.1 million - but in the two years it's been in place it has almost paid for itself in the savings.

Hogue anticipates within five years the new system will save the university about one million dollars in taxpayer money every year.