

Californians respond to drought, cut water use 11.5% in August

Countering its image as the state's water waster, Southern California rallied during the summer and dramatically cut its water use, new state numbers show.

The State Water Resources Control Board on Tuesday announced that Californians sharply cut their water consumption during August, the hottest month of the year. The board reported an 11.5% reduction in water production -- about 27 billion gallons -- in August compared with the same month a year ago.

It was the third month in a row that the state has reduced its urban water use.

But Southern California drew special praise from officials for cutting its use by 7.8% in August, an important about-face from earlier this year when a board report showed an 8% increase in the region's water use in May. Because of its massive population, the Southland's profligate ways that month tipped the balance for the entire state, which just barely saw an increase in water use.

The data is another encouraging sign for state and local water officials, who have tightened regulations in recent months to help the state reach Gov. Jerry Brown's 20% reduction goal.

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"For now, it appears the audience is listening," Felicia Marcus, chair of the state water board, said in the group's Tuesday meeting.

Officials with the state water board were expecting water use to decrease in August after it passed an emergency water conservation regulation in July. The regulation spurred local water districts to tighten their local ordinances, and in many districts, mandatory outdoor irrigation restrictions and other measures went into effect.

In a continuing trend, the South Coast Hydrologic Region--which includes major urban areas such as Los Angeles, Santa Ana and San Diego--reduced water use at one of the lowest rates in the state, but water officials were pleased that the region cut back as much as it did. The 7.5% reduction in August was far better than the 1.7% cut in July, and a marked improvement from previous months.

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But officials have cautioned against comparing regions. Many parts of Southern California have been aggressively conserving water for years and use a relatively small amount of water per person. Cuts in Southern California may appear small, but that's because many residents are already using less water than their northern neighbors.

The state is expected to gather per-capita water use numbers on Oct. 15 and release them in the coming weeks.

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