

Field Poll: More Californians want mandatory water rationing

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Amid stubborn drought conditions, more Californians are warming to the prospect of government-imposed mandatory water rationing, but a majority still favor the state's current approach of urging residents to voluntarily curtail their water use.

Support for rationing swelled to more than a third of voters in the latest statewide Field Poll, a rise of 7 percentage points since last spring. Support is greatest in the Bay Area and other parts of Northern California.

Meantime, an increasing number of voters think that the state is experiencing a severe water shortage. Ninety-four percent describe the situation as "serious," with nearly seven in 10 characterizing it as "extremely serious." To put that in perspective, when the state was in another long-term water shortage in 1977, far fewer voters (51 percent) described their feelings at the time as "extremely serious."

"You can see that as the seriousness of the situation seems to be expanding in the public's view, it's willing to start making more trade-offs in certain areas than it was willing to do before," said Mark DiCamillo, the director of the poll. "As the shortage continues, we'll see how far voters are willing to go."

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"The public is taking a more extreme view of this," he added. "It's not just your more typical drought. People are thinking this is getting very, very serious."

The survey comes after the state water board ordered urban water agencies to take a fresh look at restricting landscape irrigation, the biggest component of urban water consumption.

A year after Gov. Jerry Brown asked residents to cut water use by 20 percent, Californians reached the threshold in December, bringing down their collective consumption by about 22 percent compared with the previous year. January figures are slated for release on Tuesday.

Poll respondents, while nearly universal in their assessment of the drought's gravity, were mixed on what should be done.

David Bahr, 34, of Marysville, works as a foreman for a large pump company and said he regularly experiences the devastating effects of the drought. Still, he cautioned against forcing individuals and businesses to slash their usage.

"You have to be very careful when you talk about rationing because you are talking about something that is the lifeblood of people," Bahr said. Not only does it help homeowners maintain their property values and landscaping, he said, "but even the trees and vegetation add to the air quality."

"If you take away from people the ability to water their lawns and (take) care of their trees, you're getting that much pollution that's being recycled though the very few trees that we do have here. You kick yourself ... either way."

He also questioned how to equitably manage a rationing program, noting some people maintain more property than others.

“You’re going to base it on what: A household size? A property size? The amount of people in there? How are you really going to do that to make it fair?”

Paulette Holland, 56, of Fresno, agrees with Bahr. She thinks the limits on watering and other outdoor uses more than suffice. She likened the threat of further restrictions to living “in a third-world country where we can only drink the water once a day.”

Holland predicted: “Then we are going to be dictated to where we can’t even turn the water on.”

But others say more must be done.

Kevin Mings, a 41-year-old mechanic from Tehachapi, said he uses recycled water whenever possible. Mings limits how much he washes his dishes and clothes, and estimates that he’s exceeded the voluntary 20 percent threshold by a healthy clip. “When I saw the prices of things in supermarkets going up because of water, that’s when it really hit me,” Mings said.

He believes it’s time for the state to move ahead with mandatory rationing plans. “That’s the only way I think everybody is going to see how serious it is,” he said. “Voluntary cutbacks (are) not enough.”

David Williams, a 22-year-old senior at Chico State University, said he also favors forced reductions. Williams takes what he calls “drought showers,” a shower-shortening method in which he turns off the water while applying soap. But he worries that fellow students and people he knows are not taking enough similar steps. “I see myself kind of alone for the most part,” said Williams, an aspiring Peace Corps worker. “There is “not much action being taken.”

Pollsters also found growing concerns about water storage and supply facilities. Three months after statewide voters overwhelmingly approved a \$7.5 billion water bond, the survey showed four in 10 voters think the state’s existing water storage and supply equipment is inadequate. Slightly fewer found it barely adequate.

“The public has already given its consent for the government; they just haven’t seen it yet,” DiCamillo said of the bond package.

A slim majority of voters look favorably on relaxing restrictions for dams and reservoirs on government parkland and forest reserves. And they are nearly evenly split over possibly eluding environmental rules protecting fish and the Bay-Delta region on behalf of farmers and residents’ water needs.

“California has so much environment to protect. It has oceans. It has mountains. It has gorgeous vistas. It has deserts. It has forests. And the people here appreciate that and want to protect it,” DiCamillo said. “You are talking about making trade-offs between that kind of fundamental concept and water development, which is now becoming a major concern.”

Should water rationing be voluntary or mandatory?

Voluntary

Mandatory

Vote/Results

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