

State poised to step up crackdown on water wasting

By Kurtis Alexander

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Drought-stricken California is preparing to raise the ante on water conservation.

Starting next month, households around the state may be limited to two days a week of outdoor watering. Restaurants might be barred from serving water unless a customer requests a glass. And hotels could have to get approval from guests before washing their towels.

The constraints, which would carry fines of up to \$500 per violation, are part of a broader crackdown on water use that state officials are proposing as California faces a likely fourth year of drought.

While the new conservation measures are seen as common-sense practices — steps that many people are already taking voluntarily — state officials say getting everyone on board will go a long way to stretching the state's diminished water supplies.

The proposal builds upon temporary restrictions enacted last summer, which target outdoor watering, and are set to expire April 25.

The [State Water Resources Control Board](#) is scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to enact the new, broader rules for another 270-day emergency period. But state officials say they will eventually go a step further and consider making the mandates permanent.

“What we're experiencing now, while draconian and maybe the worst we've ever had ... may not be as abnormal as we see it today,” said [Frances Spivy-Weber](#), a member of the water board's governing council.

'Climate-change California'

Noting that drier weather may be here to stay, she said, “I think it's time to be thinking about what we should be doing in a climate-change California.”

Many California homes and businesses appear ready to conserve for the long haul.

At hotels in the Bay Area and beyond, door hangers or decorative stationery increasingly advise guests that they can save water by hanging their towels after they use them — a signal to housekeepers that no laundering is needed.

“I think it's great that they put that out there,” said [Andrea Osojnik](#), 27, of Los Angeles, who was staying at the San Francisco Marriott Marquis for business and accepted the hotel's invitation to limit her laundry service. “For them to change the sheets every night seems like a waste.”

At restaurants, the question of “still or sparkling?” has become common for gauging whether customers really need a glass of water.

“We'd like to sound progressive, but the truth is we just like to check with our guests and see what they want,” said [Miles Palliser](#), the owner of the [Corner Store](#) in San Francisco, where water is already served only upon request.

“I can't see why any restaurant would be opposed to this,” Palliser added. “It's going to save not only the environment but the water bill.”

As for outdoor watering, the proposed rules would extend the restrictions adopted in July. Those included bans on spraying down sidewalks and driveways, overwatering lawns, washing cars without a shutoff nozzle on a hose, and using drinking water in ornamental fountains.

Additionally, watering would be barred within 48 hours of a rainstorm, and local water departments that don't already limit what days their customers can water would be required to restrict watering to two days a week.

State officials say they don't know exactly how many water departments currently have no limits on watering. But under the proposed rules, agencies would have to report their efforts, as well as a host of other information to help the state better monitor conservation.

The new regulations, if approved by the state water board, would have to be signed off by the Office of Administrative Law as a matter of procedure, and likely take effect in late April.

Enforcement of the rules — including penalties — would be the responsibility of the local agencies. State water board officials say they want to intervene at the community level as little as possible but, at the same time, make sure conservation is a priority.

California is home to hundreds of water districts that independently source their supplies, whether from mountain reservoirs or coastal creeks, and some need to do a lot more than others to keep the taps flowing.

Fines up to \$500

The watering restrictions passed by the state in July, like the new set being considered, allow local water departments to fine residents and business owners up to \$500 for violations.

Most departments have not resorted to penalties, however, including agencies in San Francisco, San Jose and the East Bay, all of which reported that warnings did plenty to keep customers in line.

“The ability to issue fines can be an effective deterrent,” said [Max Gomberg](#), a senior environmental scientist for the water board who helped draft the regulations this year and last.

Year-over-year water use in California fell about 10 percent during the final seven months of last year, the period tracked by the state. The reduction remained short of the 20 percent cut that Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) asked of urban users when he declared a drought emergency in early 2014.

In January this year, the last month evaluated, statewide conservation was just 8.8 percent.

“Moving from where we are today to where we need to be is probably going to take more,” said Spivy-Weber.

The rainy season this year, which will soon come to a close, is on track to be the fourth in a row with below-average precipitation. State officials have estimated that California needs 150 percent of normal rainfall this winter to begin putting a dent in the drought. That is very unlikely at this point.

The state's largest reservoirs remain lower than usual, and the snowpack that recharges those reservoirs is less than a fifth of normal.

Scientists have pinned the four dry years on a persistent mass of high-pressure air that has hung over the state and blocked storms from reaching shore. But why the system has emerged remains under investigation, with some citing climate change as a source and others saying the warming climate is merely exacerbating the state's already dry conditions.

Researchers, though, agree that California has experienced prolonged droughts before and will see long periods of drought again.

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Tightening the taps

The State Water Resources Control Board last year barred people from spraying down sidewalks, driveways and patios, watering lawns or gardens to the point of causing runoff, washing cars without a shutoff nozzle and using drinking water in ornamental fountains. New rules that may be adopted by the board Tuesday in a bid save water during the ongoing drought include:

Restaurants and bars prohibited from serving water without a customer request.

Hotels and motels required to offer guests the option of not having towels and linens laundered daily.

Water agencies required to inform customers when leaks are detected on customer property.

Water agencies required to restrict customers' outdoor watering to as little as two days a week.

Homes and businesses prohibited from watering when it's raining or within two days of rain.