

California poised to tighten watering restrictions

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Millions of Californians soon may be forced to adjust their lives around a crucial timekeeping device in their homes. Not their alarm clocks, but their irrigation timers.

The State Water Resources Control Board on Tuesday is poised to get even tougher on water conservation as California now seems assured of a fourth year of drought. The main focus of the proposal set for a board vote is landscape watering, responsible for about 70 percent of all urban water consumption in California.

The board is expected to order every urban water agency in California to limit outdoor watering to specific days of the week – for both residential and business customers. In many cases, this would mean only two days per week.

California has never before considered such a sweeping statewide mandate on landscape irrigation, not even during the drought of 1977, often referenced as the worst in modern times. But it now seems certain the present drought will eclipse that marker, making more drastic measures necessary.

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The move comes after data from January showed Californians reduced their water use only 8.8 percent compared to January 2013, missing by a wide margin the governor's emergency drought order last year asking state residents to cut water use by 20 percent each month compared to what they used in 2013. Water board members think this occurred because the month was unusually warm and dry, and residents opened up hoses and sprinklers to water landscaping.

"It's clear that there is still excessive outdoor watering throughout the state," said Tracy Quinn, a policy analyst on water issues at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Los Angeles. "The board could and should do more."

Last year, the water board ordered every large urban water provider – those with more than 3,000 customers – to take measures to restrict landscape watering. But officials now concede this order was not strict enough.

The order called on water agencies to activate a portion of their "water shortage contingency plan" – a document required of all large water suppliers – to limit landscape watering. But the plans are not uniform, and each agency responded differently. Some restricted watering to three days a week. Others told customers not to water during the hottest daylight hours, but otherwise allowed daily watering.

"The way we wrote things this last year, in hindsight, was probably too big of a loophole to leave open," said Max Gomberg, a senior environmental scientist at the water board. "We're trying to tighten that up."

[The new proposal](#) requires water agencies to activate that portion of their shortage plan that limits landscape watering to certain days. If their plan has no such provision, they would be required to allow watering only two days per week.

This requirement also would be extended, for the first time, to 2,500 small water providers, or those with fewer than 3,000 customers. These agencies are not required by state law to have a shortage plan. As an alternative to specifying watering days, these smaller agencies would be allowed to impose other rules to achieve a 20 percent reduction in water use.

In another major change, all water agencies also would be required to ban outdoor irrigation during "measurable rainfall" and for 48 hours after rain ceases.

“None of this stuff has been done before at the statewide level,” Gomberg said.

Gomberg did not know how many water agencies would be affected by the rule changes, because the state doesn’t track how many agencies limit watering days. Neither does the Association of California Water Agencies, or ACWA, which represents 430 agencies that deliver about 90 percent of the water used by the state’s cities, farms and businesses.

David Bolland, special projects manager at ACWA, said he suspects most large water agencies already have rules on the books that limit watering days. For those that don’t, he plans to ask the water board to allow agencies to amend their water shortage plans as they see fit, rather than be forced to adopt the two-day watering rule. ACWA also wants 60 days to comply, rather than the 30 days set out in the proposed order.

“There needs to be that flexibility of adapting to local conditions,” Bolland said. “We think it is appropriate at this point to focus additional attention on outdoor irrigation. One of the things it does is kind of raise the profile of the issue in communities where maybe it hasn’t reached yet.”

In the Sacramento region, 12 out of 19 members of the Regional Water Authority already limit landscape watering to certain days, though not always two, said Amy Talbot, the authority’s water efficiency manager.

This includes Sacramento, which has among the region’s strictest watering rules, adopted as standard operating practice before the drought began. The city’s rule typically allows watering only one day a week during winter, and three days a week when daylight saving time is in effect. When the drought emergency began last year, the city cut that back to two days a week during the warm months. Watering is banned between 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. at any time of year.

Talbot said her agency supports the state’s move to get stricter on outdoor watering.

“Landscape water use ... plays a large part in the Sacramento region’s overall water consumption,” she said, “which is why water providers here for many years have been focusing on promoting water efficiency outdoors.”

The rule package, if adopted, would require millions of Californians to search their garages and backyards for the dusty plastic box that houses their irrigation controller. For many people, this is a “set and forget” contraption that keeps sprinklers gushing no matter what the weather is or what the local water agency requires.

These gadgets can be difficult to reset, especially because the operating manual often gets lost. To help, the website SaveOurWater.com – partially funded by the state Department of Water Resources – offers a [repository of downloadable operating manuals](#) for many irrigation controllers.

The state this year will be watching more closely to see if customers and agencies are complying with the rules. Since July, large water agencies have been required to submit monthly reports to the board on their water conservation efforts. If Tuesday’s rule package is adopted, they also would have to begin reporting how many warnings and fines they issue to control water waste and how many personnel they have devoted to enforcement.

Failure to comply with the new rules could result in fines of \$500 per violation per day for agencies, individuals or businesses.

The water board also is working on a new water-waste phone hotline. It would allow anyone in the state to report water waste by calling a toll-free number. The water board would then notify the property owner and the local water agency to ensure it gets fixed. Gomberg hopes to have the hotline operating in time for summer.

“Another set of emergency regulations – say in late spring or early summer – is definitely a possibility if we think that more needs to be done,” Gomberg said.

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Watering restrictions

Water agencies in the Sacramento region that already restrict landscape watering days:

- City of Sacramento
- El Dorado Irrigation District
- Placer County Water Agency
- Rancho Murieta Community Services District
- Carmichael Water District
- Sacramento Suburban Water District
- City of Folsom
- Sacramento County
- Elk Grove Water District
- City of Lincoln
- Rio Linda/Elverta Community Water District
- City of West Sacramento