

California Water-Wasters Elude Fines as Drought Persists

By FENIT NIRAPPIL Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Mar 14, 2015, 6:34 PM ET



California water regulators, alarmed by slack conservation three years into a crippling drought, took the unprecedented step last summer of establishing statewide restrictions and gave communities a hammer to enforce them: a \$500 fine for excessive watering of lawns, hosing down driveways and running decorative yard fountains with drinking water.



The drought persists, but most local water departments have been reluctant to crack down on water-wasters. Warning letters are unusual. Small fines are rare. And the \$500 hammer is virtually never wielded.

Still, the State Water Resources Control Board is voting Tuesday on adding more restrictions even while acknowledging it's not sure how— or whether— Californians are following existing rules.

Recognizing that hole in data collection, the board plans to start tracking how cities ensure compliance with water regulations.

With no statewide data available, The Associated Press queried more than a dozen communities around the state and found wide disparities in enforcement.

In the Southern California desert city of Coachella, not a single home with an emerald lawn has received a warning letter. Los Angeles sent more than 5,000 warning letters but issued only a pair of \$200 fines last year for a service area of 4 million people. Meanwhile, the communities of San Ramon and Dublin east of San Francisco imposed nearly \$40,000 in fines after losing access to a key source of water.

"We are not seeing the level of enforcement we need to," said Heather Cooley, director of the water program at the nonprofit environmental group Pacific Institute in Oakland. "Without it, you aren't getting the same amount of water

savings."

Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) declared a drought emergency in January 2014 and called on residents to reduce water consumption by 20 percent. The state has hit that number during only one month — December. The reduction slipped to 9 percent the next month, below the 11 percent monthly average since July.

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the state water board, said the agency plans to track enforcement to see if it leads to conservation. She said agencies don't need to issue fines if they're making a concerted effort to teach residents about the drought.

"It's not all about spanking people, it's also about being in relationships with them," Marcus said.

Still, she acknowledged that she hears frequent complaints about the lack of aggressive drought enforcement. The board is planning to set up a water waste hotline for residents who believe their tips have been brushed off by local departments. The board also plans to send warning letters to offenders and the agencies serving them.

Representatives of water agencies say fines can be counterproductive to educating customers about conservation. Since Summer, Santa Maria residents used 34 gallons a day more than other Central Coast residents, but the city has only responded to 20 calls about water wasting and hasn't issued any penalties.

"That \$500 fine isn't going to bring the water back, changing behavior is what's going to save water in the future," said Shad Springer, the city's director of utilities.