

# With reservoirs depleted, Water Resources Control Board must restrict water use

By the Editorial  
Board

Amid the worst drought in at least a generation, and possibly the worst in modern California history, the state Water Resources Control Board today will consider tougher restrictions on outdoor watering by residential and business users.

The action is long overdue.

Californians in January reduced their water use by only 8.8 percent compared to January 2013. That's a far cry from the conservation goal set in an emergency order by Gov. Jerry Brown, who asked Californians to reduce usage by 20 percent each month from 2013 levels.

In response to Brown's order, the water board last year directed major water agencies to activate emergency plans that are supposed to target landscape watering. But each agency has its own plan.

So in some places, such as Sacramento, that meant limiting watering to two days a week, one day a week during the winter. Elsewhere, it was three days. In some cities, watering was allowed daily, just not during the hottest hours.

That all would change under the new rules being weighed today by the water board, as [The Bee's Matt Weiser reported recently](#). The proposed restrictions would be the broadest ever adopted in California, and are coming none too soon.

Water scientist [Jay Famiglietti of the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory/Caltech wrote in a recent op-ed](#) that California has "only about one year of water supply left in its reservoirs, and our strategic backup supply, groundwater, is rapidly disappearing."

The Water Resources Control Board proposal would require all urban water agencies to activate contingency plans that limit the number of days customers can water their landscapes. If an agency does not have such a limit in their plan, the state rule would limit watering to two days a week.

The change also would prohibit users from watering turf or ornamental landscapes during measurable precipitation and for 48 hours after a rainfall. Large water agencies would have to report in more detail to the state about their water usage and restrictions.

The rules would require restaurants and bars to serve water only on request, and mandate that hotels give patrons the option of not having their linens and towels washed each day during their stay.

Urban water use accounts for only about 20 percent of water consumption statewide. Agriculture uses the other 80 percent. If the drought continues, the state may have to find a way to shift some of the water now used on farms to the cities.

If that day comes, it will involve a messy and potentially lengthy battle over water rights and the future of agriculture in this state.

In the meantime, outdoor urban landscapes use almost as much water as Californians consume in their homes and businesses, and most of that outdoor use is discretionary.

The proposed rules will stave off even stricter indoor conservation measures, at least for now, and leave the state with a small cushion to survive another year of drought if need be.

The water board should adopt the rules today, and local water agencies and governments should enforce them strictly in the months ahead.