

California restricts yard watering as drought persists

By Matt Weiser
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California regulators on Tuesday ordered every water agency in the state to restrict how often customers can water their landscaping, an unprecedented move that marks another milestone in the severe and ongoing drought.

The decision was adopted unanimously by the State Water Resources Control Board and will take effect in about 45 days. Officials at the water board said it is the first time any state in the nation has imposed an emergency water conservation requirement on every local water agency within its borders.

“This is a serious drought,” board member Steven Moore said. “We need to face it down together and look at these issues very seriously.”

A range of speakers supported the move at the board’s Tuesday meeting in Sacramento, from environmental groups to golf course associations.

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At the same meeting, state and federal water officials reported that the Sierra Nevada snowpack – source of about 60 percent of the state’s fresh water – was 12 percent of average as of Tuesday. In the approximately 100 years the state has been recording snowpack across the range, that marks a historic low for this time of year.

This came after California saw its driest-ever January, normally the wettest month of the year, and as the driest-ever March is unfolding.

“As dismal as the water supply was last year, at this point it’s becoming increasingly likely that we’re looking at an even drier situation in 2015, because the snowpack is actually less than where we were last year,” said John Lehigh, who oversees operations for the State Water Project, the massive plumbing system that includes Lake Oroville and the California Aqueduct.

The order by the water board requires every urban water provider in the state to limit the number of days each week that customers can water lawns and other landscaping. Such use accounts for 50 percent to 70 percent of all urban water consumption in the state.

Many water agencies are already in compliance with the order, although the exact number is unknown. In the Sacramento region, 12 out of 19 members of the Regional Water Authority limit landscape watering to certain days of the week, though the actual number of days people can water each week varies by agency.

When the drought emergency began last year, the city of Sacramento tightened its landscaping regulations and now has one of the more restrictive policies in the region. The city’s rule allows watering only one day a week during winter, and two days a week when daylight saving time is in effect. Watering is banned between 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. at any time of year.

The regulation gives agencies flexibility to set the number of watering days appropriate to local circumstances. They can comply simply by activating their existing drought-response plans, if those plans contain measures to limit watering days. If an agency’s plan does not contain the necessary language, it can amend the plan or simply limit outdoor watering to two days per week.

Small water agencies – those with fewer than 3,000 service connections – can choose to comply instead by adopting

other measures that reduce total water use by 20 percent.

The 3,085 urban water providers in California, both large and small, must comply with the regulation within 45 days. In turn, it will affect every kind of urban water customer, including homeowners, commercial businesses and industrial enterprises.

The measures require water agencies to ban landscape irrigation on rainy days and within 48 hours of measurable rain. They also must impose rules on certain retail businesses, including a ban on serving water in restaurants unless requested by a customer, and a requirement for hotels to offer guests the option to skip washing linens.

The unanimous vote Tuesday extends a host of drought rules adopted last year, including a statewide ban on hosing off driveways and decks and mandatory reporting by water agencies of their conservation progress.

The new measures were prompted, in part, because customers have not met the January 2014 emergency order by Gov. Jerry Brown, which called on Californians to reduce their monthly water use by 20 percent compared with usage in 2013. Compliance has varied wildly – conservation was just 8.8 percent in January – which officials blamed in part on the water demands of landscaping.

“Given that virtually the entire state is experiencing severe to exceptional drought ... it seems appropriate to send a stronger message for the coming months,” Larry Rohlfes, executive director of the California Landscape Contractors Association, told the board.

The rules allow local water agencies to fine customers as much as \$500 per day for a violation. The water agencies, in turn, can be fined by the state as much as \$10,000 per day if they don't heed the regulations. Local agencies also now will be required to report their enforcement activity to the state each month, so the water board can track whether water agencies are going after violators.

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California's new watering rules will require millions of state residents to search their garages and backyards for the dusty plastic box that houses their irrigation controller. These gadgets can be difficult to reset, especially if the operating manual has been lost. To help, the website SaveOurWater.com – partially funded by the state – offers a [repository of downloadable operating manuals](#) for many irrigation controllers.