

EDITORIAL: Southern California shows how to save water



An aerial photo last week shows golf course communities bordering the desert in Cathedral City, near Palm Springs. Unlike many water agencies in Southern California that have strong conservation programs, the ones in this area will have to slash water use by 35% because their per-capita use is so high.

CHRIS CARLSON — Associated Press

- Saving water

The State Water Resources Control Board plans to set conservation goals for each urban water agency using their September 2014 per capita use, in gallons used per day.

San Francisco: 46

San Diego: 82

Long Beach: 82

Los Angeles: 93

Davis: 129

Sacramento: 129

Fresno: 135

Roseville: 155

Folsom: 171

Modesto: 193

Citrus Heights: 195

Lincoln: 211

Fair Oaks: 243

Merced: 280

Many of us in the rest of the state still see Southern California as the land of swimming pools and lush lawns. But that image is way out of date as we deal with the record drought.

Southern Californians, for the most part, are far ahead in conserving, recycling and reusing water. If the state is to reach the 25% mandatory reduction in urban drinking water use, residents and businesses elsewhere — particularly in well-off suburbs — have to catch up.

The State Water Resources Control Board is sounding the alarm and aiming the deepest water reductions at communities with the highest per capita use. It's only fair to give credit for how much cities have already done on conservation, though the water board, itself, cautions that other factors — hotter weather, lower population density, higher incomes — can affect the numbers.

Speaking of fairness, we can't forget that farmers need to conserve more as well, given they use far more water than urban dwellers. Showing how serious this drought truly is, Gov. Jerry Brown is considering curtailing historic water rights — which could hit Big Agriculture hard.

The water board plans to issue final conservation targets in early May for each of more than 400 urban water agencies. Its preliminary framework released last week put suppliers in one of four reduction categories — 10%, 20%, 25% and 35% — based on per-capita use last September. Compliance, however, will be measured against water use in 2013, before Brown's emergency drought declarations, in part not to penalize those that quickly responded.

Residents' water use in many cities in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys is higher, on average, than in many

cities in Southern California.

Last September, per-capita water use was 135 gallons a day in Fresno, 193 gallons in Modesto and a whopping 280 gallons in Merced — well above the statewide average of 124 gallons and putting them all in the 35% reduction category.

While Sacramento has made meaningful strides in conservation, the average resident still used 129 gallons per day, so it will have to cut 25%. So will Davis, which also reported 129 gallons per day. Water agencies in Sacramento-area suburbs have even more work to do. They face 35% cuts.

By contrast, per-capita use last September was 82 gallons a day in Long Beach and San Diego, 93 gallons in Los Angeles and 105 in Anaheim.

In part, that's because conservation measures are more established — and the water-saving mentality more ingrained — in Southern California. Many suppliers have aggressively offered cash rebates to rip out thirsty lawns and to install low-flow toilets and dishwashers.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves 19 million people, increased its conservation incentives fivefold to \$100 million this year. Over the years, the district has invested heavily in recycled water, groundwater cleanup and groundwater storage, and has amped up public awareness campaigns.

The results are rather remarkable. While Southern California has 5 million more people now than in 1985, it is not importing more water. The annual savings of about 300 billion gallons of water is enough to supply L.A. and San Diego combined.

With so much savings wrung out, there are not many other tools left to reduce indoor water use, Metropolitan General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger told The Sacramento Bee editorial board last week. The district is now considering cutting deliveries of imported water and billing water agencies a hefty surcharge if they go over their quota.

Unfortunately, a similar conservation tool that some cities are using — and more should be considering — is under legal threat. A case challenging the legality of tiered pricing — billing heavy water users more per gallon above certain benchmarks — is before the 4th District Court of Appeal.

The plaintiffs sued the city of San Juan Capistrano saying that tiered pricing violates Proposition 218, which requires that government fees be set only according to actual cost.

We hope that the court is wise enough to see that in this time of drought, state law allowing rates that encourage conservation should win out.

That was reinforced Tuesday when the water board said that urban water savings in February — only 2.8 percent compared to February 2013 — was the lowest since it began tracking conservation last July. Californians have hit the governor's voluntary 20% goal only once, in December.

Still, the conservation does add up. From last June through February, the total savings of 148 billion gallons was enough to provide water for 2 million Californians for one year.

The water board has taken to shaming cities that aren't getting with the program, but a big unresolved issue is how the new reduction goals will be enforced. While the water board is giving local officials freedom in coming up with conservation rules, it has also imposed statewide regulations.

Among them, it has banned using drinking water to wash sidewalks and driveways, and ordered restaurants to serve water only on request. These are common sense measures to follow, even if we weren't in a historic drought.

We are, though, and there's no end in sight. That means the rest of us have to think of water a lot more like Southern California already does.