

Dozens of agencies seek to alter reports on how much water residents used

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When California's State Water Resources Control Board announced last month that it was basing its orders for mandatory water cutbacks on each community's per capita water use, it elevated a somewhat obscure figure into the spotlight: residential gallons of water used per person per day.

Now, as the board prepares to finalize its conservation targets for each community, its staff is busy sifting through scores of inconsistencies in the way water agencies have reported that figure to the state. At stake is exactly how much water millions of Californians will be allowed to use this year.

The water board is basing its cutback orders on usage reports that water agencies statewide began filing monthly last year, in response to new drought regulations. Under the board's proposed drought rules, communities across the state would have to cut water use anywhere from 4 percent to 36 percent by next February compared with 2013 usage. Communities that used the most water per person per day between July and September last year are targeted for the biggest cuts.

With those mandates now hanging in the balance, water districts statewide are contacting the state to say they made mistakes in their usage reports. About one third of California's 411 urban water districts submitted corrections last month to water production data they had reported to the state last year. If accepted by the state, those changes would reduce the severity of the cuts that customers in 50 water districts need to make this year, according to a Sacramento Bee review of state data.

"What's unfortunate is that there is this last-minute scramble," said Max Gomberg, senior staff scientist with the State Water Resources Control Board. "They have been reporting for months and months, and we have always been available if they were uncertain about their methods.

"They really should have been taking it seriously all along," he said.

In addition, many agencies interpreted the state's instructions for reporting water use differently, according to interviews with state and municipal officials. A review of the reports shows some agencies did not account for water lost in their system due to leaks and other inefficiencies, potentially inflating their per capita numbers and increasing the amount of water their customers would need to conserve. Others have adjusted their figures based on water loss, which is allowed by the state, Gomberg said.

"There is a lot of apples and oranges," Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the massive Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said in an interview with The Sacramento Bee's editorial board last month. "Each agency is going to be using their own methodology – so I take it with a fair degree of salt."

With California's drought stretching into a fourth year – and 2015 off to an unusually hot, dry start – Gov. Jerry Brown last month issued the first-ever order for mandatory cuts in urban water use across the state. His order called for a 25 percent reduction statewide in urban water consumption but warned that some districts would need to cut more than others.

The state board, which oversees California's complex system of water rights, was charged with hammering out the details of the governor's order. Its staff proposed a system that placed water agencies in nine tiers based on how much water their customers used per person per day last summer. Each tier is assigned a cutback order, ranging

from a low of 4 percent to a high of 36 percent.

The cutbacks the board is proposing would save about 400 billion gallons of water between June 2015 and February 2016. The corrections submitted by local water districts would lower those potential savings by about 7 billion gallons, not enough to significantly hamper efforts to reduce water use statewide by 25 percent, data show.

“It shouldn’t make a difference of more than a percent,” Gomberg said.

The changes, though, would make a significant difference for many communities. Fifty water agencies representing about 3 million Californians submitted corrections that would lower the amount of water their customers would need to save this year, often by a large amount.

By comparison, seven submitted corrections that would result in their customers having to conserve more water this year.

Dozens of other districts submitted changes that, under the board’s current proposal, do not change their conservation standard.

Gomberg said most of the requested fixes involve changes in the population data being reported: Raising population figures without adding consumption means lower water use per capita.

The Tahoe City Public Utility District, for example, initially told the state it used almost 300 gallons per person per day in summer 2014. It recently asked to correct those figures to barely 100 gallons per person per day. As a result, its customers would need to cut water use by 20 percent this year under the water board’s proposal. They were originally slated for a 36 percent cut.

“The population numbers we were using in the beginning were based on full-time population here,” said Tony Laliotis, the district’s director of utilities, adding that his agency had objected to the state’s methodology at the time it submitted its reports.

“This is not an accurate measure of our water consumption per capita. We need to recognize our seasonal population as legitimate water users and count them ... We talked to the state. They said, ‘absolutely’.”

The Elk Grove Water Service district initially told the state that its residents used about 220 gallons per person per day last summer. After the board released its proposed cuts, district officials reviewed those numbers and found serious mistakes, General Manager Mark Madison said.

The new calculations put Elk Grove’s usage at 145 gallons. With that change, the district’s customers would need to lower their usage by 28 percent this year rather than the 36 percent originally proposed.

West Sacramento also submitted fixes. It initially told the state that its residential customers used 264 gallons per person per day last summer. After the city learned it faced a 36 percent cut in the board’s tiered framework, it submitted corrected numbers, resulting in usage of 143 gallons per person per day. The fix would move the city from one of the region’s heaviest water users to one of its conservation leaders. Its customers would instead face a 28 percent cutback.

The original numbers were “a quick and dirty calculation” that did not account for many small businesses and industries, West Sacramento Director of Public Works Denix Anbiah said. The new estimate is more thorough, he said.

Further complicating things, both Sacramento and West Sacramento are among several communities in the state that are not fully metered. They can only make educated guesses about residential water use because – unlike most California cities – they cannot simply look to residential billing data.

“In places that aren’t fully metered, you can only (report) on a macro level,” Kightlinger said.

Water board officials are set to vote on their drought regulations this week. They have indicated the final version may create additional tiers of usage, beyond the nine, and fine-tune the conservation targets accordingly. If that happens, several more water districts could see changes in how much they have to conserve based on the data corrections they have submitted.

The board will review all the requested corrections to determine if they are legitimate, Gomberg said. For now, its staff has included the modified figures in the latest proposal for water conservation targets.

“If we see justifications that just don’t make sense, we are going to work with that agency,” he said.

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