

EDITORIAL: California needs a 'cash-for-grass' program



The drought hits home as city officials mandate twice-a-week watering schedules for homes, businesses and the city as California continues to face historical drought.

SW PARRA — THE FRESNO BEE

Fact: California's tough new water restrictions will force dramatic changes in the way we use water, especially outdoors.

Fact: The state treasury is running a multibillion-dollar surplus this year, and much of the unexpected windfall may be part of a one-time surge in revenue that won't be sustained as the economy cools off.

Question: Why doesn't Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature allocate some of that surplus for a turf-replacement program that enables people to adjust their landscaping to the drought?

Our sense is that hundreds of thousands, if not several million Californians, are eager to do their part. They recognize the need to pull out large expanses of water-gulping grass and replace it with artificial turf or rocks and drought-tolerant plants. They also are eager to replace water-wasting sprinklers with drip systems.

As Brown is putting the bulk of the responsibility for saving water on homeowners, he should provide them with "cash-for-grass" incentives to reduce their water consumption.

In regard to the new water regulations, which the state Water Resources Control Board approved Tuesday, they won't be easily met. But considering the severity of the drought, they are necessary.

Despite voluntary calls for conservation, most Californians have failed to take the shortage seriously. In March, the state's urban water users saved just 3.6% compared with the same month in 2013. Brown had called for a 20% reduction.

The new rules call for a 25% average cut in water usage, and they will be mandatory. Some areas that have historically used more water, such as Fresno, will have to reduce their usage further. How to achieve those savings will be left mostly to local water agencies to decide.

But there is no avoiding the fact that, at least until it starts raining again, Californians are going to have to get used to less vibrant or, in the best-case scenario, different kinds of landscapes. Outdoor watering accounts for about half of urban water usage, and in some areas it is well above that.

Whether to offer a rebate, and how much, are decisions that should be left to local governments and water agencies. But the state can do more to help, perhaps by offering matching funds to locals that choose to give rebates to water-savers. To avoid penalizing those that stepped up first, matching funds also should go to reimburse agencies that already have been granting rebates.

That's a one-time investment of available funds that would help individual Californians cope with the drought while also making the governor's water-saving goals more achievable. And it would prepare the state for the long haul if this drought turns out to be the new normal.