

California drought brings tighter building codes to cut turf use

By Matt
Stevens

Sprawling green lawns around new homes, businesses and schools in California will be a thing of the past under new state building codes approved Friday.

This alone won't solve the drought, but over time ... landscapes will have a much lower water demand. It will reset the norm for what we think about landscape. - Peter Brostrom of the Department of Water Resources

The California Building Standards Commission cut the amount of water many landscapes can use by more than 20% and effectively forced developers to plant less turf and more drought-friendly foliage. It's the latest of myriad recent efforts state officials have made to reduce water use to comply with Gov. Jerry Brown's executive order to cut urban water use by 25% amid California's fourth year of drought.

FOR THE RECORD:

Water for landscaping: An article in the May 30 California section about watering limits for new construction said that buildings larger than 2,500 square feet would have to comply with the new rules. The rules apply to landscape areas larger than 2,500 square feet, not buildings. —

8

"This alone won't solve the drought, but over time, as buildings are built and new landscape goes in with less turf, landscapes will have a much lower water demand," said Peter Brostrom of the Department of Water Resources. "It will reset the norm for what we think about landscape."

Under current regulations, a complex formula determines how much water can be used on the landscape of a newly constructed commercial or residential building. Changes approved Friday to the California Green Building Standards Code will require new construction larger than 2,500 square feet to use about 22% less water. Additions to existing buildings that require a permit also are subject to the new rules, officials said.

Schools will be forced to use 35% less water, but much of their landscapes are play areas that get an additional water allowance.

The changes are in response to Gov. Brown's executive order, which required builders to use drip or microspray irrigation if they use drinkable water outside newly constructed homes and buildings. Officials decided that directive was too prescriptive and instead reduced the water allowance for new construction, Brostrom said.

21

The move comes days after the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California pumped \$350 million of additional funding into lawn-removal rebates and other conservation programs.

"This change limits how much grass gets planted in the first place," Brostrom said.

He predicted that the new rules will force builders to limit the amount of turf grass they install to no more than a quarter of the total outdoor landscape. Officials say at least half of all urban water use is outdoors, and state regulators have stressed the need to let lawns go brown as the hot summer months approach.

Tracy Quinn, a civil engineer and policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said she was disappointed that only buildings larger than 2,500 square feet would have to comply with the new rules.

In Gov. Brown's April order, he called on officials to regulate water use in all newly constructed homes. The changes "don't fully respond to the governor's executive order," she said.

Still, Quinn praised the new regulations, which she said give landscapers "a lot of flexibility" to decide how to design water-efficient spaces, including the use of drip irrigation, captured rainwater, recycled water or gray water.

"Given the emergency, the action today is a tremendous positive step," she said. "This is going to move us away from large lawns with a lot of turf, but I don't think it will put an excessive burden on developers as far as landscape design."

matt.stevens@latimes.com

Twitter: [@ByMattStevens](https://twitter.com/ByMattStevens)

Copyright © 2015, [Los Angeles Times](#)