

Pool industry touts water savings in California drought

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

Leigh McDonough stood in her backyard on a hot spring day and listened to the steady shush-shush-shush of two garden hoses filling her new pool and hot tub with water. Her family installed the 21,000-gallon pool despite a state mandate to cut overall water consumption by 25 percent amid a crushing, four-year drought.

McDonough, however, wasn't worried: She was told her pool would actually help save water that would otherwise go to her lawn.

In this photo taken on Wednesday, May 13, 2015, Horacio Cisneros, right, and his brother Juan remove a spa from the backyard of a home in Murrieta, Calif. As residents struggle to reduce potable water consumption by 25 percent, the California Pool and Spa Association is promoting a campaign called Let's Pool Together and aggressively lobbying water districts to quash proposed bans on filling pools and spas. | Chris Carlson AP Photo

It's a mantra being pushed by the California pool and spa industry in recent months, as water conservation campaigns have placed residential pools and other conspicuous water users in the crosshairs.



As residents struggle to cut waste at the tap, the California Pool and Spa Association is lobbying water districts to quash proposed bans on filling pools and spas. The industry cites an in-house study that found that a standard-sized pool, plus decking, uses one-third the amount of water as an irrigated lawn after an initial fill.

"We're not saying, 'Solve the drought, put in a pool,' but the bottom line is people who put in a pool are making a decision to do something more water efficient with their backyard. They're saving water," said John Norwood, the California Pool and Spa Association's president. "Pools are landscaping."

Some water conservation experts question the pool industry's math and say, at best, residential pools and lawns use roughly the same amount of water after an initial fill. There are 1.18 million residential pools in California, according to Metrostudy, which tracks housing information.

And at least a dozen cities and water districts in the hardest-hit areas of the state have passed bans on new swimming pool permits, filling new swimming pools and draining and refilling existing pools.

The South Coast Water District, in one of the poshest areas of Orange County, approved a ban on filling or refilling residential pools and the city of San Jose, which is trying to cut water use by 30 percent, did the same in April. That city also prohibits topping off existing pools with more than one foot of water, although the mayor did remark that unfilled pools would make excellent skate parks. The bans generally do not include community pools.

"We're in a very significant drought. We're asking people not to water their lawns," said Kerrie Romanow, director of San Jose's environmental services department. "That does require some level of sacrifice."

Even as cities and agencies crack down, contractors in some parts of the state are seeing a small uptick in demand as the recession ends. Applications for new pool permits declined steeply during the recession, but pool contractors in some areas without pool-related water restrictions say business is up this spring.

The rebound is slower in California than other warm-weather states like Florida, Texas and the Carolinas that aren't

experiencing intense drought, said Toby Morrison, Metrostudy's national sales manager.

"Our sales are up fairly significantly, but we have no idea how many people are influenced by reading in the newspaper and saying, 'Gee, I might not ever be able to fill it or will the neighbors throw rocks at me if I build one,'" said Cecil Fraser, owner of Swan Pools in Lake Forest, California.

McDonough's water district has not yet implemented restrictions and a pool seemed right for her two young children.

"For us, it was sort of a must-have when we bought this place," said McDonough. "So, I'm happy that it's getting done now and that we were able to fill it."

Experts caution that the pool-versus-lawn calculations depend on too many variables to be reliable, including how much water splashes out, whether there's a pool cover to prevent evaporation and how often the lawn was watered before it was ripped out.

In the end, the water used for pools and lawns is roughly the same, said Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute in Oakland, a nonprofit research institute focused on the environment and sustainability. And letting a lawn die or replanting with desert landscaping uses dramatically less water than a pool, so the comparison misses the point, he said.

"These are luxuries and we're in a really bad drought and everybody needs to step up instead of pointing the finger at the other guy," Gleick said.