

Artificial turf: Backlash amid water district rebates for fake grass

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Posted: 06/24/2015 01:40:14 PM PDT [Comments](#) | Updated: a day ago

OAKLAND -- It's an increasingly popular option for saving water: Replace your living lawn with artificial turf.

At least 12 Bay Area water districts offer cash rebates to homeowners to make the switch, but other officials are joining a backlash against the surging popularity of plastic grass as a way to relieve water shortages.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District Board is the latest to balk at subsidizing synthetic turf after hearing complaints that it has undesirable environmental effects even if it does well in reducing outdoor water use.

Critics told the water board Thursday that switching to synthetic grass creates waste, raises ground temperatures, deprives wild animals and bugs of habitat, inhibits water percolation into the ground, and deprives the earth of living green blades that pump out oxygen and filter global warming gases.

A worker installs artificial turf. At least 12 Bay Area water districts offer cash rebates to homeowners to make the switch from grass to artificial turf. (Global Syn-Turf)

"We are losing biodiversity at an alarming rate," said Tom Panas, an El Cerrito resident. "The idea of subsidizing the replacing of turf with artificial lawns is unbelievable."

The Santa Clara Valley Water District offers no rebate. "There are healthier and more ecologically sound alternatives that we would like to promote with our Landscape Rebate Program," the district says on its website, while citing concerns over waste, hot surface temperatures, habitat and air pollution.

But Santa Cruz decided about two years ago to offer rebates as a way to help local residents cope with some of the most severe water shortages in Northern California.



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"While the purist may want to have native plants going into the ground, there is an intense customer interest in artificial turf," said Toby Goddard, the city's administrative services manager. "Frankly, many people are doing it for maintenance reasons and aesthetics. Many lawns here have turned brown."

While the East Bay board said it would wait until July 28 to decide, a majority of four on the seven-member board indicated they would oppose spending public funds on rebates to encourage artificial turf.

"This is a no-brainer," said Doug Linney of the water board. "I can't see why we would pay (rebates) for artificial turf."

Stop Waste, an anti-waste consortium of Alameda County cities and agencies, also opposes rebates -- arguing that replacing lawns with drought-resistant plants and mulch is a better way to cut water use while providing a sustainable environment.

Artificial turf makers and installers, however, say their business has doubled or tripled in the past two years as people look to slash water use and avert time-consuming maintenance.

Saloni Kharbanda, of San Ramon, installed artificial turf in part of her backyard a few months ago.

"I want to save water, and have a green-looking surface for my dogs to play on," she said. "I'm trying it out in one area before I decide whether to install more of it."

It was this public interest that sparked EBMUD managers to propose a one-year pilot program to offer single-family homeowners a rebate of 50 cents per square foot to install artificial turf to replace live grass.

EBMUD already offers a similar rebate per home for replacing grass with drought-resistant plants and mulch.

Under the proposal, the rebate would be capped at \$1,250 per home, and half of the old lawn area must be covered with live, low water-using plants.

A survey of 45 Bay Area water agencies with lawn-removal rebates found that 33 do not offer rebates for switching to artificial turf, while 12 offer rebates.

The Contra Costa Water District offers rebates for artificial turf but only if no more than half the old lawn area is replaced with water-permeable faux grass and at least half is converted to live, drought-resistant plants.

"If someone wants a turf area for their pets or a play area for their kids, then it's up to them to figure what works for them," said Jennifer Allen, a CCWD spokeswoman.

Synthetic lawn makers and installers said the environmental criticisms of faux grass are overblown, while the value in saving water is proven.

"You don't have to keep applying water like you do to a (live) lawn, which is the biggest water use for people's landscaping," said Rachel Brady, spokeswoman for Global Syn-Turf, a large manufacturer with a Hayward warehouse. "It's not living, but it's no different from using gravel or rocks in your landscaping."

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