

California regulators discuss water pricing in drought

By FENIT NIRAPPIL Associated Press

California water regulators heard proposals for a statewide drought fee and hefty fines for water-guzzling homeowners as part of a Wednesday workshop discussing how to implement Gov. Jerry Brown's order for water pricing to maximize conservation.

Officials at the State Water Resources Control Board said they weren't looking at a total overhaul of water bills across the parched state dealing with its four-year dry spell.

"The state is not rushing out here to supplant local authority and local control," said Max Gomberg, a senior scientist at the board.

Joe Grindstaff, general manager of the Chino-based Inland Empire Utilities Agency, suggested the California could set a state standard for reasonable residential water use and impose fines on local agencies whose customers use too much.

"The truth is you can have a really nice lawn and really nice life living within those standards," Grindstaff told the board.

Members of the state water board appeared cool to the idea, with one quipping Grindstaff would need police protection because so many people would hate the idea.

The board didn't take any actions Wednesday and didn't indicate any future plans for increasing the price of water.

A law accompanying the California budget allows agencies to slap the worst water wasters with fines up to \$10,000. Another bill, SB789, that would have allowed water departments to impose a 300 percent tax on the heaviest water users' bills has stalled because it lacked support.

Conservation experts agree the price of water is among the best ways to encourage savings, but the legality of such tactics have come under scrutiny after a court struck down punitive rates in the Orange County city of San Juan Capistrano.

The 4th District Court of Appeal said charging heavy users incrementally more per gallon without showing it cost more to provide violated a 1996 voter-approved law that prohibits government agencies from overcharging for services.

Lester Snow, who leads the California Water Foundation, says that law, Proposition 218, should be reformed because it's deterring water-saving efforts.

"We are pushing people to conserve, and we have systematically withheld some of the tools they need," he said.

Two-thirds of water districts use some form of tiered water pricing to encourage conservation. Many say their rates are legal because higher water use requires them to tap more expensive supplies.

While the governor's order calls for the board to help develop water rates and penalties to maximize conservation, the workshop discussion also veered into a statewide water fee that would help pay for infrastructure projects during the drought.