

As rebate program ends, Turf Terminators slashes its workforce

By Matt
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For the past several months, state water officials have placed a bull's-eye on the California lawn, urging residents to use rebates to tear out their turf and plant less-thirsty foliage.

And in what has been the state's biggest drought success story, Southern Californians have responded en masse, pledging to rip up about 170 million square feet of grass.

Southland water district ends popular lawn-removal rebate program

But this week, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California — home to the largest turf removal rebate in the state — announced that about \$340 million in rebate funding was all spoken for.

Then, on Friday, a Los Angeles turf removal company that had drawn praise for creating hundreds of green jobs said it had slashed its workforce because the funding dried up.



Turf Terminators, which ballooned from a staff of three to more than 450 over the last several months, laid off 30% of its employees and furloughed an additional 40%, the company said Friday in a statement to The Times. Officials would not specify the number of employees affected.

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“Unfortunately, the sudden shutdown of the rebate program has forced the company to downsize its operations,” the company’s statement said. “A sizable percentage of the company remains fully employed and the company is still fully operational and servicing its existing customers.”

Turf Terminators seized on the frenzy to tear out lawns by essentially offering to remove the lawns and replace them with drought-tolerant plants in exchange for the rebate money. The company said it was “hopeful that the Metropolitan Water District will reinstate their rebate program so that we can bring back our workforce.”

MWD directors will get an update on the turf rebate program next week, “but we have no indication that they will add more money,” MWD spokeswoman Sherita Coffelt said.

More than 45,000 applications for turf removal have been approved or are being processed, Coffelt added. All of the approved but unfinished projects provide “a significant opportunity for landscapers to get involved,” she said.

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David Mandler, a spokesman for Turf Terminators, said that of the 45,000 jobs awaiting completion, Turf Terminators has roughly 1,400 – about 3%.

“We are reducing staff because we are no longer accepting new applications and are simply servicing customers that we have under contract,” he said, adding that “the company has no intentions of ceasing operations.”

In his State of the City address in April, Mayor Eric Garcetti highlighted Turf Terminators, saying the hundreds of jobs that the company created were “some of the thousands of new, green jobs that have bloomed since I became mayor.”

Garcetti's office did not respond to a request for comment.

Customers, though, have had mixed reactions to the company's customer service and job quality. While some have relished the chance to get free landscaping, others have complained that their calls were not returned and that the gravel or mulch the company used was an eyesore.

Mandler said his company responds to all customer complaints and "service(s) any issues for free."

Meredith McCarthy, programs director at Heal the Bay, said that ultimately, Turf Terminators provided an "oversimplified response to a complex need."

"Those people with good intentions — in six months will be staring at a dead, hot yard and they will be very disillusioned," she said. Turf Terminators "touted themselves as this green job, and those of us who watched the rebate go so fast knew this was coming. It was an unsustainable business model.

"We thought [they] were part of the solution," she added, "but in the end, they were in business to make money — and now that money is gone."

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UPDATED

8:16 p.m.: This article was updated with reaction from Meridith McCarthy of Heal the Bay.

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