

California adopts strict lawn-reduction rules for drought savings

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The era of lush, green lawns adorning new California homes moved a dramatic step closer to ending Wednesday.

Drought-tolerant plants must dominate lawns around new homes and businesses across California under new regulations unanimously approved by the California Water Commission.

The new rules effectively limit the amount of turf grass around newly constructed homes to 25 percent of landscaped area. Under prior rules, turf grass could take up about one-third of landscaped area.

The restrictions will apply to all homes with more than 500 square feet of landscaped area – essentially, all new, single-family, detached homes in the state. Old rules only applied to new homes with more than 2,500 square feet of landscaped area. California homes, on average, feature about 2,500 square feet of landscaping, state officials said.

The new restrictions also effectively eliminate any turf grass or other thirsty plants around new commercial and public development, with a few exceptions, state officials said.

Gov. Jerry Brown ordered the California Department of Water Resources to strengthen landscaping restrictions as part of his drought executive order in April. Beginning in December, municipalities will have to adopt rules that are at least as strict as the state's new "model ordinance."

State officials made no apologies for the tougher regulations.

"The real driving force behind the model ordinance is to reduce the square footage of turf that's just ornamental," said Mark Cowin, director of the Department of Water Resources, in an interview with The Sacramento Bee.

State officials project that developers will build almost 500,000 new housing units and add 20,000 acres of new residential landscaping in California over the next three years. Under the adopted rules, which will not have much impact on existing homes, new yards will use about 20 percent less water and commercial landscaping will use about 35 percent less, state officials said.

"It's going to save so many acre-feet" of water, said Nancy Vogel, spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Agency, the department's parent.

Vogel added that businesses will have to justify their development of large swaths of grass.

"You can't really have turf because it looks pretty," she said. "You have to prove that you're using it for weddings or gatherings or whatever."

Response among developers and industry was mixed.

Home building executives said the industry will adapt to the new regulations.

"The industry is already adjusting to some degree in how they plant front yards," said Greg Paquin of The Gregory Group, a Folsom homebuilding consultant.

He said he visited a recently built development Wednesday in the Serrano community, in El Dorado Hills, and found very little in the way of traditional lawns. "There's no grass – it's all natural vegetation," Paquin said. "There are alternatives that we're starting to see."

Tim Murphy, chief executive of the Sacramento Regional Builders Exchange, said the proposal would add several layers of complexity to California's already regulatory-heavy development environment, and some of the smaller irrigation contractors may struggle to adapt.

But he said California's increased emphasis on water savings is "the new normal."

"This will be more cumbersome," he said, "But in the long run, this will be more beneficial to our state, and we have to adapt."

Ron Wolfarth, principal product manager for the Rain Bird Corporation, which manufactures irrigation systems, said his company initially expressed deep concerns about the new regulations but changed course after Department of Water Resources officials responded by tweaking the regulations. "We fully support any measure to use our water efficiently," he said.

Ed Zuckerman, president of Stockton-based [Delta Bluegrass Company](#), said the new rules would unnecessarily kill off lawns in California – and might do the same to his and other sod farmers' businesses.

In a typical year, he farms between 1,000 and 2,000 acres of sod depending on the demand.

"If you like to live in Phoenix, Ariz., with gravel in your front yard and no irrigated landscape," he said, "that's what some people would like to push."

He said that while lawns have become pariahs in the drought, they're beneficial because they keep urban areas cool. He worries that when the drought ends, the state's landscaping ordinance will be stuck even if homeowners want their grass back.

"You better watch out for what you hope for," Zuckerman said. "You're going to have dust storms in cities, and heat islands in cities, like you've never seen before, and energy bills soaring."

Mark Slavens, vice president for environmental affairs at Scotts Miracle-Gro, said not all lawns should be treated alike. It's a mistake to limit homeowners "to a 25 percent turf grass all the time, no exceptions," he said. The rules should allow families with small children, for instance, to devote more of their yards to turf, he said.

John Norwood, president of the California Swimming Pool and Spa Association, said the new rules would hurt his industry. He said it will be difficult under the rules for homes to install both turf grass and pools on a property and that Californians will avoid obtaining necessary permits and instead "use the underground economy to avoid the restrictions."

Marc Mondell, economic and community development director for the city of Rocklin, said the new regulations are too complex and will create new enforcement work for city employees. In a letter to the commission, he called some of the regulations "very onerous to both ... agencies and the public."

The new rules will have little impact on existing residential landscaping, state officials said, but will apply to existing homes that undertake a project requiring permits and involving at least 2,500 square feet of landscaping. That would limit the impact of the rules on pool construction, among other projects, officials said.

The rules are designed to further reduce the amount of water used for outdoor landscaping, which accounts for roughly half of urban water consumption in California. They complement Brown's April order prohibiting the use of potable water to irrigate landscapes of new homes and buildings unless drip or microspray systems are used.

"It's a big deal," said water commission chair Joseph Byrne, referring to Wednesday's vote adopting the regulations. "A lot more new development is going to be covered."

The new regulations also require efficient sprinkler nozzles in irrigation systems, mostly ban turf in street medians and

encourage use of recycled water.

Even without the new rules, Sacramento-area residents reduced their water use by 35 percent in June, the first month of mandatory statewide conservation, compared with June 2013, according to an analysis released Wednesday by the Regional Water Authority, which represents two dozen water providers in the greater Sacramento area.

The conservation figures suggest area residents are working to comply with Brown's [executive order mandating 25 percent reduction](#) in urban water use compared to 2013.

The June savings weren't as dramatic as in May, when relatively cool weather enabled Sacramentans to [reduce usage by 40 percent](#). Nonetheless, officials said they were impressed with the results for June, considering the hotter weather.

"While the June savings are impressive, it is critical that residents continue saving – and do even more, if possible – in July and August," said Amy Talbot, the water authority's water efficiency program manager, in a prepared statement. "Conserving now will help preserve our local water supplies, including Folsom Reservoir."

At the Sacramento County Water Agency, which services about 170,000 residents, mostly near Elk Grove, water use fell by 41 percent compared to June 2013. Posting big conservation numbers during the summer is necessary if the region is going to meet mandated targets, said water agency spokeswoman Diane Margetts.

"This an excellent number, but it is important to remember we need to achieve an average reduction of 32 percent," she said. "We need to be reaching these high numbers now when the opportunity to conserve is highest, as outdoor water use is highest."

All of the region's largest water suppliers cut use by at least 30 percent in June compared with the same month in 2013, according to a Bee survey of district officials. Roseville customers cut water use by 39 percent in June. Bobby Alvarez, the city's interim water conservation administrator, said he expects big numbers in July, too. "We are trending really well," he said. "If you drive around the neighborhoods, you can see a lot of golden brown out there."

Statewide conservation figures for June haven't been released yet. Urban Californians cut their water use by 29 percent in May, the last month of voluntary cutbacks.

Targets for water use cuts vary by water district under Brown's order. Areas with historically heavy per capita water use, like the Sacramento area, need to conserve more; most Sacramento water agencies have to save 28 to 36 percent compared with 2013.

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Water Use Cuts in June in the region's largest agencies (compared to June 2013)

Agency	Pop	June Cut	Conservation Target
City of Sacramento	480,155	36%	28%
California-American Water Company	201,418	38%	20%
Sacramento Suburban Water	174,595	31%	32%
Sacramento County Water Agency	172,760	41%	32%
El Dorado Irrigation District	128,500	32%	28%
Roseville	122,946	39%	28%

Placer County Water Agency	95,717	32%	32%
Citrus Heights Water District	67,333	41%	32%
Davis	68,315	32%	28%
Folsom	63,376	34%	32%
Woodland	57,223	41%	24%

Source: Bee interviews with district officials