

# California curbs lawns for new homes, businesses

By Kurtis Alexander and Hamed Aleaziz

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Photo: Rich Pedroncelli, Associated Press

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The beloved, bright-green American lawn is closer to becoming a relic in California.

State officials, who are already urging people to let their grass yards wither during the drought, passed new rules Wednesday essentially banning them from being planted around new commercial buildings, while limiting grass to about 25 percent of the landscaping at new homes.

The regulations, adopted by the [California Water Commission](#), come at the direction of Gov. [Jerry Brown](#), who in April

called for the state's construction guidelines to better promote water conservation after four historically dry years.

"This establishes a new direction for landscaping in California — toward lower water use," said [Peter Brostrom](#), water use efficiency program manager for the [California Department of Water Resources](#), who helped craft the rules. "It'll push people away from strictly planting lawns and to look for other options."

Existing landscapes are not affected. The regulation takes effect Dec. 1.

Under the rules, new homes with more than 500 square feet of landscaping must include water-efficient sprinkler systems and a mix of vegetation that doesn't exceed certain water-use limits. The outdoor space must be accounted for in a documented budget.

People building homes with between 500 and 2,500 square feet of landscaping have a simpler option: They can comply with terms on a checklist, including having no more than 25 percent grass turf in the yard and installing smart sprinkler controls and pressure regulators.

As a result, a lot more native and drought-tolerant plants are expected to adorn new neighborhoods. Outdoor irrigation typically accounts for as much as half of urban water use.

The new requirements piggyback on the state's existing Model [Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance](#), initiated during dry times in the early 1990s. The current regulation, however, applies only to new homes with more than 2,500 square feet of landscaping — and it allows a third to one-half of a lot to be landscaped with grass, according to a sliding scale.

The updated ordinance also includes the grass ban for new commercial, industrial and government buildings. A few exceptions allow for grass when used for sports fields and parks.

Grass will also be prohibited on street medians.

"The bottom line is that the water restrictions are challenging," said [Pam Cosce](#), owner of [Lazar Landscape Design and Construction](#) Inc. in Oakland. "But they're also creating opportunities to be more creative — and do our jobs better. Our goal is to create usable outdoor living spaces, and lawn isn't necessarily a requirement. But we aren't ruling them out completely, either."

The new standards are expected to save significant water as California demand swells. By 2050, the population is expected to grow from 39 million to 50 million, according to state projections. Nearly a half-million new homes — with 20,000 acres of new landscaping — are anticipated in the next three years.

Not everyone thinks the crackdown on grass is a good idea.

[Jurgen Gramckow](#), president of [Southland Sod Farms](#) in Ventura County, said the rules are too limiting and won't allow new homeowners to provide a traditional yard for their children and pets to enjoy.

"The hard fact," he said, "is that this changes the face of the California landscape from the lush green look to something more akin to what you see in Arizona."

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