

California water cutbacks likely to be extended next year

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Despite forecasts of a wet winter, Californians can expect another year of water conservation in 2016 under an executive order issued Friday by Gov. Jerry Brown.

Californians are currently under orders to reduce consumption by an average of 25 percent, as compared with 2013. Brown's order would extend the cutbacks through next Oct. 31 "if drought conditions persist through January 2016."

Many experts and state officials said it's almost a certainty the conservation order will continue through next fall. While El Niño is expected to drench the state this winter, many forecasters believe it won't create enough precipitation to repair water supply problems created by four years of drought.

"We know (the drought) won't be over in January. We know we need to extend," said Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, in an interview with The Sacramento Bee.

Marcus said the contours of the extended cutbacks won't be fleshed out for a while. If California does get heavy rain this winter, it's possible the 25 percent conservation rate could be relaxed. Water board officials already are talking with local water agencies about fine-tuning the regulations for 2016.

Marcus said Brown directed the water board to consider modifying the existing rules to take into consideration agencies that have been able to augment their existing supplies. When the board issued its rules last spring, several agencies in the Sacramento area complained they should have been given credit for the work they had done over the years securing additional supplies.

Brown last spring ordered urban water agencies to cut usage an average of 25 percent through next February compared with 2013. The target for each agency varies based on historical per-capita usage patterns; comparatively heavy users, including much of the Sacramento region, have been told to cut by anywhere from 28 percent to 36 percent.

Since those restrictions took effect June 1, water consumption statewide has fallen by 28.1 percent through the end of September. However, the savings rate has tailed off in the past couple of months, and it appears some cities will struggle to meet their mandates. The state [recently fined the city of Beverly Hills](#) and three other Southern California agencies \$61,000 each for failing to comply. Several agencies in the Sacramento area are struggling to hit their numbers, including Folsom and Carmichael.

Shauna Lorange, general manager at the San Juan Water District near Folsom Lake, said another year of mandated conservation targets likely would mean water rate increases across the state. Water agencies generate most of their revenue based on how much their customers use.

"I would anticipate what ends up happening is people have to pay more and more to use less," she said. Her district is considering an annual rate increase of up to 19 percent, and she said other local agencies are preparing similar hikes.

Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, said agencies expected mandated cuts to extend later into 2016 and that "we agree with the governor that California can't let its drought guard down." But when considering new conservation targets, he said, the state should take into account how much water districts already have conserved and the unique climatological factors that affect use.

The city of Sacramento, which must cut consumption by 28 percent, is prepared for more conservation. "We'll do the

best that we can, and I'm confident the residents will rise to the occasion," said Bill Busath, the city's utilities director. The city so far has cut usage 33 percent.

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