

California water regulators suggest slight easing of conservation requirements

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As they look to next year, state regulators are suggesting a slight easing of the conservation requirements that slashed urban water use across California.

In a draft released Monday, the staff of the State Water Resources Control Board recommended a few changes to the 2014 drought order, which mandated a 25% cut. The effect of the modifications, which the board will vote on in February, would be to lower that number to 22%.

Although cities and towns have on average exceeded the required savings this year, a number of water districts complained that their individual targets failed to take into account regional climate or other factors.

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The staff recommendations represent a nod to some of those objections, while rejecting others.

"We're being cautious," said Max Gomberg, the board's climate and conservation manager. "We're recognizing that there are concerns about equity that were raised, and we're addressing them with these modest adjustments. But we're maintaining a strong statewide conservation level."

Under the proposed changes, regional climate would be considered, as well as local growth and the use of desalinated seawater and recycled water in drinking supplies. Together, the staff says the credits will trim statewide savings by 3 percentage points, lowering the conservation target to 22%.

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The regions that would most benefit from the revisions are hot inland and desert areas; Orange County, which replenishes its groundwater supplies with recycled water; and much of San Diego County, which is starting operation of a seawater desalination plant in Carlsbad.

But a water district's conservation target would drop by no more than four percentage points.

The urban cuts imposed this year were the first in state history. Under an executive order issued by Gov. Jerry Brown in the spring, the board set individual water savings goals for cities that ranged from 4% to 36%. Some districts have struggled to meet those numbers, but the statewide savings since the order took effect in June have amounted to a 27% decline compared with 2013 levels.

Depending on what the winter brings, the board this spring could revisit the issue and further modify the conservation mandate, which is to remain until the end of next October.

"If we really do get a strong El Niño ... I could see reducing it or even potentially getting rid of it," Gomberg said. "But conversely, if El Niño doesn't show up and we're in year five and things are as bad or worse than last year, it could go up from 22%."

The bulk of this year's savings have come through reduced outdoor use. Water districts restricted landscape sprinkling, rolled out hundreds of millions of dollars in turf removal rebates, increased rates and in some instances fined flagrant water users.

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But as use declined, so did utility revenue. And districts complained that the targets failed to factor in past conservation efforts, blazing inland temperatures, local population growth or alternative water sources.

The board staff agreed with only some of those points, denying, among other things, requests to subtract some groundwater supplies from local use.

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The board, which is taking public comment on the staff report, will issue a draft regulation in mid-January and vote on it in February.

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