

Drought-stricken California ramps up water restrictions

March 17 2015, by Fenit Nirappil



In this March 11, 2014 file photo Steve Upton, right, demonstrates how to use the water timer he installed on the water spigot at the home of Larry Barber, left, in Sacramento, Calif. Upton, an inspector for the water conservation unit of the Sacramento Utilities Department, follows up on tips concerning city residents wasting water in one of California's driest years on record. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, file)

California residents have to turn off their sprinklers, and restaurants won't give customers water unless they ask under new drought regulations approved Tuesday.

The State Water Resources Control Board has extended and expanded restrictions on water use as California enters its fourth year of drought, and winter ends without significant storms or snowfall to replenish dwindling reservoirs.

The drought's effects are rippling across the state, hurting wildlife and forcing farmers to leave fields unplanted. So far this winter, wildfires are burning through nearly four times as many acres as usual. The state firefighting agency reports that the dry conditions are forcing it to maintain its highest-ever level of seasonal firefighters straight through the winter.

Amid this backdrop, environmental advocates are calling on the state water board to find even more aggressive ways to slash water use, such as rationing, enforcing plumbing upgrades and going after corporate landscapes.

"The board could and should do more," said Kate Poole, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The state agency has conceded its actions so far have been focused on the easier ways to immediately cut down urban water use. It voted Tuesday to extend statewide outdoor water limits imposed in July, barring washing down driveways, decorative fountains without recirculating pumps and sprinklers that spray pavement.



In this July 29, 2014 file photo Nik Martinelli, a water conservation specialist for the city of Santa Cruz, finds a broken sprinkler head at an office park in Santa Cruz, Calif. Due to California's historic drought, state water regulators, took the unprecedented step last summer of establishing statewide restrictions and gave communities a big hammer to enforce them: a \$500 fine for excessive watering of lawns, hosing down driveways and running decorative yard fountains. (AP Photo/Bay Area News Group, Patrick Tehan,file)

New rules will require local water departments to restrict the number of days residents can water their lawns. If they don't, residents must follow a state limit of twice a week. Homeowners are also barred from using sprinklers on days when it rains and for the next two days after.

Golf course owners objected to limiting days they can water grass, telling the board Tuesday that the regulation would threaten their ability to keep attractive landscapes, which they say are already water-efficient.

The regulations also mandate common business conservation practices statewide. Restaurants can't offer water unless customers ask, and hotels and motels must offer guests an opportunity to decline fresh towels and sheets at hotels.

It's up to local water departments to enforce these rules, which are expected to take effect later this spring. They can fine offenders \$500 per violation, but few have gone that far.

The water board also decided Tuesday it will start tracking how agencies enforce the regulations, including the number of citations and warning letters issued.

The Associated Press found wide disparities in enforcement, from Los Angeles issuing just two \$200 fines in a service area of nearly 4 million people to Santa Cruz levying more than \$1.6 million in water waste penalties.

Meanwhile, residents have been falling short of Brown's call to slash water consumption by 20 percent when he declared a drought emergency early last year. On average, monthly water use has fallen 11 percent since the state imposed water restrictions in July, according to surveys of water suppliers.

Fearing dry conditions may be the new way of life in California, members of the board said they must look at establishing permanent conservation rules.

"In our emerging climate regime with a decreased overall Sierra snowpack and more extreme weather including drought, it's essential," water board scientist Max Gomberg said Tuesday.

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