

Californians cut water without state imposing fines

August 27 2015, by Scott Smith



In this June 23, 2015, file photo a lawn is irrigated in Sacramento, Calif. A report is due out Thursday, Aug. 27, 2015 on monthly state water conservation figures. Many California cities are conserving well, and officials are turning their attention to the few cities/agencies that aren't doing so well. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)

For the second straight month, Californians exceeded hefty water conservation mandates during the relentless drought without the state imposing fines, officials said.

Cities cut water use by a combined 31 percent in July, exceeding the governor's statewide conservation mandate of 25 percent, the State Water Resources Control Board reported Thursday.

The figure surpassed the June figure of 27 percent savings despite hot summer temperatures.

The strong figures show California residents are beginning to understand the dire need to cut back in the fourth year of the drought, said Felicia Marcus, chair of the water board.

"This isn't your mother's drought or your grandmother's drought," she said. "This is the drought of the century."

Gov. Jerry Brown has ordered cities to use 25 percent less water, compared to the same period of 2013, the year before Brown declared a drought emergency.

Officials said heavy rain in July in Southern California played a role in the latest savings, causing people to leave their sprinklers idle. Enforcement and strong messaging by water agencies were bigger factors, Marcus said.

"We have a movement in urban California," she said.

The state water board also released water conservation figures for each community.

Some 290 water suppliers serving 29 million people met or exceeded their conservation standard in July—an increase from 265 in June, officials reported.

Regulators are turning their focus to the communities failing to conserve

and making personal visits with local officials in cities that haven't responded to the mandate by Brown.

Four smaller communities reported missing target conservation numbers by 15 percent or more. One was Livingston, but state regulators say a Foster Farms chicken processing plant in the area counteracted conservation by the community's 15,000 residents.

Regulators say they are working with city officials and Foster Farms on a plan that doesn't force the plant to lay off employees and saves water where possible.

Foster Farms said in a statement that it is committed to water conservation and working with the city to reduce use.

The state's largest water agencies met targets set by the state.

Los Angeles Department of Water and Power reported saving 21 percent in July—more than its mandated 18 percent savings. San Diego used 29 percent less water. The San Jose Water Co. consumed 38 percent less, and Fresno reported conserving by 31 percent.

State officials have the ability to fine underperforming water districts. Fines start at \$500 a day and increase to \$10,000 a day. So far there have been none from the state, which is leaving education and enforcement to local districts.

Regulators called the Coachella Valley Water District the comeback kid for saving about double in July over June, hitting 41 percent conservation.

The 300,000 residents in the Coachella Valley have been urged to take advantage of programs that help them install efficient toilets and

showerheads or rip out lawns, said Heather Engel, director of communications and conservation for the district.

In July, the district started using tiered water rates, resulting in bills that totaled thousands of dollars in a few extreme cases, she said.

The bills followed a warning in June, telling customers what their rate would be under the upcoming rate system.

"They saw that warning and they changed their behavior," Engel said. "I don't know what else to attribute it to."

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