

Calif. sets water use targets amid record low savings

By Fenit Nirappil, AP

SACRAMENTO – California cities face mandatory targets to slash water use as much as 35 percent while regulators warn voluntary conservation hasn't been enough in the face of a devastating drought.

Underlining their point was data released Tuesday showing a new low in saving water. Residents did less to curtail water use in February than any other month since officials started tracking conservation.

Along the south coast, home to more than a third of Californians from San Diego to Los Angeles, residents actually showed an increase in water consumption despite longstanding calls for cutbacks.

"These are sobering statistics and disheartening statistics," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the state Water Resources Control Board.

Overall, the numbers indicate that statewide water use fell by less than 3 percent in February as compared to baseline data established in 2013, the last year before Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency.

The figures mirrored preliminary reports that helped spur Brown last week to demand that urban water users statewide cut back their consumption by 25 percent.

To meet that goal, the water board on Tuesday released draft water reduction targets for more than 400 water agencies ranging from 10 to 35 percent. The targets are set based on per-capita water use.

Some cities must drastically improve water savings. San Diego and Los Angeles must cut water use by 20 percent after cutting only 2 percent and 7 percent since June.

Others such as Santa Cruz, which cut its water use by a quarter, are likely to easily meet smaller targets.

State officials say they're prepared to slap large fines on agencies that don't take steps to conserve or meet reduction targets, although they haven't used similar powers earlier in the drought.

The newly released water use data show the difficulties of changing longstanding habits, such as watering lawns, washing cars and taking long showers, board members said at the Tuesday meeting. Also, they noted, that water use in February 2013 was already low because the weather was cooler that year.

Still, the governor should be able to use the figures to his advantage. His call for a mandatory 25 percent cutback goes beyond his request asking residents to voluntarily reduce their use by 20 percent when he declared the drought emergency in January 2014. Statewide conservation has been about 9 percent since then.

The board credited some already water-conscious communities, including Stockton, Santa Cruz and Mountain View, for slashing use in February.

Places such as Newport Beach expected to make drastic improvements. Water use must plummet by 35 percent in the wealthy beach town during the same months consumption fell only 7 percent.

Newport Beach has reduced lawn watering to four times a week, which is twice as often as state recommendations allow, and it prohibits residents from refilling their pools more than 1 foot a week.

Since July, Newport Beach residents used about 120 gallons a day, compared to about 100 for others who live along the southern coastline.

Newport Beach officials have spent months informing residents about new regulations and ways to cut back, and they're now seeking new authority to issue fines.

"We liked the friendly approach, and it seems to be working well, but we aren't afraid to issue citations," said George Murdoch, the city's utilities general manager.

The water board has given local water departments discretion to come up with their own conservation rules, but it has established some statewide regulations, such as banning lawn watering 48 hours after rain and prohibiting restaurants from serving water unless customers ask.

The agency also plans to have municipalities penalize overconsumption through billing rates.

Water use along the coast is expected to increase this summer as tourists and seasonal residents flock to beach homes.

Meanwhile, some water agencies are working on more drastic actions of their own. Southern California's giant Metropolitan Water District will vote next week on a plan to ration water deliveries to the 26 agencies and cities it supplies, according to spokesman Bob Muir.

The cuts, which would take effect July 1, were proposed before the governor imposed the mandatory restrictions and are expected to drive agencies to curb demand and help meet the conservation goals.