

Calif. may propose water conservation changes

By Scott Smith, AP

State regulators are expected to propose changes this week to California's water conservation mandate that has required communities throughout the state to reduce use by 25 percent.

The move comes as California is in its driest four-year span on record, and officials anticipate a possible fifth year of drought. Weather forecasters say a strong El Nino weather system could drench the state, but one good year won't be enough to rehydrate the parched landscape.

Gov. Jerry Brown earlier this year required communities throughout the state to reduce water use by one-quarter. State water regulators set individual targets for local agencies to meet, varying between 4 and 36 percent compared with 2013, but those targets will expire in February.

Brown recently extended his executive order, giving regulators authority to enforce conservation measures through October 2016, if California still faces drought this January.

Local community leaders have criticized the individual targets as unfair and unrealistic. In Southern California, local governments argued state officials should acknowledge huge investments in new supplies to prepare for drought.

This year, the San Diego region completed a \$1 billion seawater desalination plant, the largest in the Americas. Orange County recently expanded wastewater recycling to produce 100 million gallons of drinking water daily.

"It has been difficult to tell our ratepayers that their investments in local supply projects have not resulted in

providing the buffer against drought as intended," Halla Razak, the city of San Diego's public utilities director, wrote state regulators this month.

Some environmental groups oppose giving local governments credit for new supplies, saying it might discourage conservation.

After the State Water Resources Control Board staff releases its proposed changes, the public will have about two weeks to comment, spokesman George Kostyrko said. A formal proposal is expected in January, he added.

Associated Press writer Elliot Spagat in San Diego contributed to this report.