

Drought report could map Nevada water policy

By Michelle Rindels, AP

CARSON CITY – A panel of water experts that spent almost a year analyzing Nevada’s persistent drought has issued recommendations that could shape Gov. Brian Sandoval’s policy agenda in the coming year.

The eight-member Nevada Drought Forum, which Sandoval commissioned in April, included water, agriculture, climate and emergency management officials who gathered information in a series of public meetings over the past year.

“I think there’s stuff in there that can be done fairly quickly, and a variety of stuff that is going to take a fair amount of planning and prioritization,” said forum chairman Leo Drozdoff, director of Nevada’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, about the 20-page report wrapped up in mid-December.

Here are some of the panel’s recommendations:

- **RAMP UP CONSERVATION:** While agencies such as the Southern Nevada Water Authority testified about their aggressive water-saving measures, the forum wants conservation efforts elevated statewide and even in smaller municipalities. Forum members want water meters on all connections, water efficiency standards for new development, tiered rate structures to promote water conservation and time-of-day and time-of-week watering restrictions.

They also recommend giving the state water engineer power to enforce water conservation plans if agencies aren’t sticking to them.

- TWEAK WATER LAW:** The forum wants incremental changes in Nevada law that strengthen the state water engineer's ability to manage the state's driest areas. Members want clarification in law that would preserve indoor water use even amid cutbacks in domestic well users' outdoor watering.

They also want to change the law to allow the small-scale capture of rainwater, as long as it doesn't interfere with others' water rights.

- CLOSE GAPS IN RESEARCH:** The state bases many of its water policy decisions on the U.S. Drought Monitor, a map that's updated weekly to reflect conditions on the ground throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico. But Drought Forum members say there are gaps in the data.

They recommend improving the map by developing a statewide monitoring network that uses a variety of information sources and makes real-time data centrally available. They also want to coordinate with other western governors to ensure western states have more of a say in the national map, and that it's measuring both hydrological conditions underground and the vegetation conditions above ground – which can sometimes give different signals about the state of the drought.

- FIND NEEDED MONEY:** Forum members noted that incentive and rebate programs can be effective at encouraging consumers to conserve, but they can be prohibitively expensive. The group wants state agencies to come up with budget proposals that could help pay for high-priority incentive programs.

They also noted that some of their recommendations, such as better drought monitoring, could require extra staff. The forum wants to identify and prioritize the resources needed to implement its plan.

- PLAN LONG-TERM:** The forum wants to support the work of Nevada's Water Reuse Steering Committee to explore regulatory changes that could allow water recycling and stretch supplies.

They also want to keep an eye on technology advances in water desalination – a process that's expensive now but could be a viable option for boosting Nevada's supply when it gets cheaper.

- EDUCATE THE PUBLIC:** The forum wants to keep the conservation message going to everyday Nevada residents, even during wetter years when drought isn't top-of-mind. They also want state staff dedicated to public outreach, including people focused on educating elected and appointed officials about Nevada's water issues.

- REWORK WARNING SYSTEMS:** Forum members recommend the state's Drought Response Committee refine its warning system. Nevada issues Drought Alerts, Drought Warnings, a Governor Drought Declaration and a water emergency declaration, but the forum wants more clarity on the difference between them.