

The next step in California's drought

By Scott Smith, AP

Some residents of drought-stricken California who let their lawns turn brown and took shorter showers could soon get some relief, while others may continue to feel the pain. In the coming months, state officials will undertake a monumental task of rewriting conservation orders for a fifth year of drought.

The challenge for state regulators will be treating millions of residents fairly, unlike the El Nino storms that soaked Northern California with considerably more rain and snow this winter than the drier Southern California. Here are some things to know:

A year ago, Gov. Jerry Brown ordered more than 400 cities and water agencies throughout California to save water by 25 percent, compared to use in 2013. In the nine months ending in February, Californians came close, using 23.9 percent less water. The standard was later relaxed, requiring them to use at least 20 percent less water, and now it is set to change again.

One possibility officials propose is taking a regional approach to water conservation. That may mean relaxing, or dropping, emergency drought orders for El Nino-soaked Northern Californians, where much of the wet weather hit and some reservoirs are spilling over the top. Strict rules for residents of drier Southern California may stay in place.

This winter's El Nino failed to erase four years of exceptional drought. It left a nearly average amount of rain and snow, not enough to help California recover from the previous four dry years. California's wet season typically

ends around April 1, with shrinking chances of significantly more rain and snow.

The State Water Resources Control Board later this month will gather in Sacramento for a public workshop to consider the next steps for conservation. Officials say they'll take suggestions from the public and work out a plan in May. Changes will likely go into effect in June.