

Questioning the easing of Calif. water restrictions

By Adam Nagourney, New York Times

EAST PORTERVILLE – California slashed urban water use over 25 percent in the face of a punishing drought last year, exceeding a mandatory order issued by Gov. Jerry Brown and turning the state into a model of water conservation. Californians tore out lawns, cut back landscape watering and took shorter showers as they embraced Brown's call to accommodate what he warned were permanently drier times.

But this year, after regulators lifted the mandatory 25 percent statewide cut following a relatively wet winter, water use is up again, a slide in behavior that has stirred concern among state officials and drawn criticism that California abandoned the restrictions too quickly. In August, water conservation dropped below 18 percent compared with August 2013, the third consecutive month of decline.

By any measure, California is confronting a complicated new chapter as it enters the sixth year of a drought that has forced it to balance huge demand for a sparse resource – water – from farmers, residents, municipalities and developers. For one thing, the situation is not as dire as a year ago after a relatively normal rainy season. Some of the most searing symbols of the drought, such as near-empty reservoirs, are harder to find.

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