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Emergency 25% cut in California cities' water use approved



A jogger pushing a baby stroller passes sprinklers at Marina Vista Park in Long Beach.

(Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

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State data released Tuesday painted a stark portrait of the uphill struggle Californians face in achieving a mandated 25% reduction in urban water use, with one official joking grimly that dealing with severe drought was similar to grappling with the five stages of grief.

Cumulative water savings since last summer totaled only 8.6%, according to the State Water Resources Control Board, far short of the historic reduction outlined in an April 1 executive order by Gov. Jerry Brown.

At the same time, the board said, most of the state's water suppliers issued 20 or fewer notices of water waste in March even though they have received thousands of complaints.

"It's a collective issue we all need to rise to. I keep thinking that we are in some stages of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross," said Felicia Marcus, the water board chairwoman, referring to the psychiatrist who wrote "On Death and Dying."

The disclosures came as board members Tuesday night unanimously approved new conservation regulations set to take effect in time for summer, when outdoor water use traditionally accounts for 50% to 80% of residential consumption.

Water board staff scientist Max Gomberg said California residents and businesses used only 3.6% less water in March than they did during the same month in 2013, the baseline year for savings calculations.

"We need to do more," Gomberg said. "Conserving now and over the summer is imperative."

Despite the meager savings, some outside experts said it was still possible for the state to achieve the governor's goal in the coming months. Brown is seeking hefty fines for water wasters, and some local water agencies have been crafting tougher conservation plans in recent weeks.

"Now we have absolute numbers. We know where we stand and where we have to go. This is the starting gun," said Conner Everts, facilitator of the Environmental Water Caucus, an organization that promotes sustainable water management. "Right now

we're scared. Right now we're in the denial stage. We have to get into acceptance, and we have a relatively short period of time to do it."

Others were more skeptical, citing new data showing that California's hundreds of urban water suppliers assessed only 682 penalties to water wasters in the last several months after receiving more than 10,000 complaints.

The enforcement data demonstrate the "need to make enforcement a true deterrent to water wasting," said Mark Gold of UCLA's Institute of the Environment and Sustainability. "People don't park in posted street sweeping parking spaces three weeks in a row. The vast majority of people in California are not looking at this as a dire situation, yet."

Most water agencies have been reluctant to impose big fines and other sanctions on water wasters, saying that they have had more success with educational outreach and warnings.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power received 1,215 complaints about water waste in March but issued only 13 penalties. DWP officials have said that they have been able to cut water consumption without major fines and believe that they will continue to do so.

Santa Cruz has taken a different approach, imposing strict rationing for much of last year. The city issued \$1.6 million in water fines in 2014 and gave violators the option to waive their penalties by attending "water school." So many people attended that the city collected only about \$800,000 in fines.

Although the water board can issue cease-and-desist orders and fine agencies up to \$10,000 for failing to comply, Gomberg said fines would not be a key element in conservation efforts.

"The goal of the enforcement work is not to issue fines, it's to work with the supplier and see if there's other steps that can be taken to get savings up," Gomberg said.

Gomberg also said the state would keep a close eye on local water agencies. If they are far behind their targets after the first month, the board will meet with the agency to review its numbers and conservation programs. The agency may need more public outreach or more stringent standards on residential watering, Gomberg said.

The water board's rules assign individual conservation targets to each of the state's water suppliers, and require cuts in consumption from 8% to 36% compared with 2013 levels.

Under the board's plan, the level of water savings each district must attain is based on residential per capita use in July, August and September of last year.

Cities and water districts with the lowest consumption during that period would have to cut the least. Heavy users would have to cut the most.

Some water suppliers, residents and businesses say they are being treated unfairly.

While some homeowners have complained that limits on landscape watering will expose them to wildfire risks, business and industry say the water cuts will hurt the economy.

"More needs to be done to balance the water use restrictions with the reality that California's \$2-trillion economy cannot survive without a reliable water supply," wrote Valerie Nera of the California Chamber of Commerce. A 25% cut, she said, would be difficult to achieve without "severe economic dislocation."

Gomberg acknowledged Tuesday that "there was a lot of economic anxiety over the impacts," but said the water board had considered more than 700 public comments when designing the rules.

Water board officials said Cal Fire told them that watering restrictions would not increase fire risk. "There's no conflict between fire protection and conservation," Gomberg said.

Cutting urban water use 25% would come at a price, according to an economic analysis commissioned by the board. The consulting firm M. Cubed estimated that such a reduction could cost the state \$1 billion to \$1.3 billion, including \$500 million to \$600 million in lost revenue for water suppliers.

Authors of the analysis noted that conservation efforts could also result in economic gains — such as investment in new technologies — but that it was far more difficult to calculate those benefits.

Jonathan Parfrey, a former DWP commissioner and executive director of Climate Resolve, said the water-use data released Tuesday “should not be cause for panic.”

“We are going to have enough water for the coming year, there’s no doubt about that,” he said. “It would be premature for the people of Los Angeles to freak out based on these numbers. However, it’s prudent to increase and redouble our conservation efforts.... It’s clear we need to be more aggressive.”