

EAST BAY TIMES

Water conservation slips in California



Sprinklers water the lawn of a Moraga home on April 24, 2015. (Photo archives)

By **DENIS CUFF** | dcuff@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: October 5, 2016 at 12:09 pm | UPDATED: October 5, 2016 at 5:06 pm

Californians' water conservation slipped in August for the third month in a row, worrying state officials that the public's memory of recent drought restrictions and rates is fading too fast.

Water users statewide reduced consumption 17.7 percent in August as compared to the same month in the 2013 base year — a much less aggressive rate than the 27 percent conservation rate in August 2015, the state Water Resources Control Board reported Wednesday.

Californians' overall saving rate was 20 percent in July this year and 21.5 percent in June, another sign that conservation is flagging since June 1 when the governor relaxed a 25 percent cutback order and left it up to local districts to set their own conservation targets.

While Northern California received near average rainfall last winter, state officials say it wasn't enough to declare an end to the drought.

"We're at yellow alert. I'm not ready to go to red alert until we figure it out," said Felicia Marcus, the state water board chairwoman. "While last year's rain and snow brought a

respite for urban California, we are still in drought, and we can't know what this winter will bring."

Water suppliers said with the rain and snow season barely beginning, it's far too early to speculate whether restrictions will come back next summer.

Marcus said the August conservation figures provided a mixed picture, with some water districts continuing to save at high levels and others falling short.

The overall savings rates slipped below 20 percent in August for the first time this summer, the state water board reported.

"Are we seeing a relaxation of conservation messaging and programs, or are we seeing abandonment of programs?" Marcus asked.

Most Bay Area water districts exceeded the 20 percent saving level in August even though their savings slipped somewhat.

Bay Area water suppliers said that customers aren't abandoning conservation even if they are letting up a bit after most drought restrictions were lifted.

The 990,000 customers of the privately owned San Jose Water Company saved 28.2 percent in August, down from the 35.6 percent savings rate in August 2015.

Company spokesman John Tang said San Jose residents learned in the drought to hold down their water use indoors and outdoors.

"Our customers are doing a great job conserving, and this effort will bode well if another dry year is in store," Tang said. "We know that for some customers, it's impacting their quality of life (dead lawns, trees, etc.) and are hopeful that there will be plentiful rainfall in the next eight months."

The savings rate among the 1.4 million households served by the East Bay Municipal Utility District fell to 16.2 percent in August, down from 26.8 percent in the same month in 2015.

"These numbers show us that our customers are continuing to save," said Tracie Morales, an EBMUD spokeswoman. "The challenge for us is to have customers continue and keep it up."

She said the East Bay district is not surprised the conservation rate slackened some after the EBMUD board earlier this year declared an end to the drought emergency and pulled the plug on higher water rates related to the crisis.

The East Bay district is entering fall with its reservoirs 79 percent full, providing a cushion against shortages if there is little rain and snow this year in the Mokelumne River basin, the central Sierra region where EBMUD captures its water.

The Contra Costa Water District also says it is pleased with its 250,000 Central County customers saving 22.1 percent in August, down 18 percent from the 40.3 percent savings rate in August 2015.

“The 22 percent savings shows people are making conservation an important part of their life,” said Jennifer Allen, a district spokeswoman. “People are saving even if they aren’t practicing the extreme measures as much, such as capturing water in buckets or cutting off outdoor watering.”

Among top savers in the Bay Area in August, Menlo Park achieved a 41.2 percent conservation rate; Pleasanton achieved 27.9 percent; and the Dublin San Ramon Services District saved 27.4 percent. The Alameda County Water District saved 22.6 percent, down from 33.5 percent a year ago.

Among cities that didn’t save as much was Sonoma, with 12.5 in August, according to figures from the state board.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.