

## Desert Water Agency board president: California's new regulation makes water future more secure

**Paul Ortega** Special to The Desert Sun

Published 7:01 a.m. PT March 24, 2024 | Updated 1:19 p.m. PT March 25, 2024

One thing is clear: California is facing more severe swings between drought and flood. We should not think of water conservation as an emergency response. Instead, we should work to conserve water as part of our everyday lives.

As a lifelong conservationist, an efficient landscape designer and a local official, protecting our water future is very important to me. I pushed myself deeper into community involvement and planning when I joined Desert Water Agency's board of directors in 2020.

In 2009, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made 2020 the deadline for water agencies to reduce their per capita water use by 20%. This was overwhelmingly successful. Despite significant population gains, Desert Water Agency, like many of its counterparts throughout the state, saved more water than required. In fact, in 2023 our customers used about 37% less water per person than in 2009.

Legislators put the next target, "Making Conservation a California Way of Life," in motion with a set of bills in 2018. Through a collaborative process with water suppliers and NGOs, state staff is developing a regulation to enact the goals in the bills. The new regulation will create a water budget for each water agency in California.

The current draft released this month, while ambitious, seems much more feasible and cost-effective than its predecessor. This current version accounts for variation throughout our complex and diverse state; however, local water managers will still have to roll up their sleeves to work with residents and businesses to achieve significant efficiency gains. I am confident that together we can make sizable strides in the coming years.

Customer outreach and conservation programs aren't new for Desert Water Agency. Our grass removal program goes back to 2014. It is our most effective program and helped remove about 1 million square feet of grass in 2023. That's over 60 million gallons of water saved every year. Continued success relies on serious community collaboration. We have seen major transformations. Homeowners, HOAs, businesses, and government agencies have all stepped up to save water. Under this new regulation, we'll need a lot more of that.

This will require a big commitment from our community, much of which is designated as disadvantaged, however, I believe that it is a worthy one. As written, the new draft regulation gives Desert Water Agency staff more opportunity to address local nuances, like seasonal population. The greater flexibility in the new draft means that Desert Water Agency can continue working with customers, and build on existing efforts to advance long-term water efficiency.

The state plans to put the new regulation into effect this coming January, so let's get going. If you haven't contacted your water agency yet, now is the time. There are so many resources and tools to help you save water. Many of them come from state and federal grants that we've worked to secure.

No resource is more important to our desert than water. Conservation helps us reduce our water demand and make the supplies that we already have go further. Together, we are preparing for the future, whatever it may hold.

Visit [www.dwa.org/reg](http://www.dwa.org/reg) to dive into the details.

*Paul Ortega joined DWA's board of directors in 2020 and currently serves as President. He lives in Palm Springs and owns a landscape design firm. He can be reached at [portega@dwa.org](mailto:portega@dwa.org).*