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# California water board implements new efficiency regulations

*The new rules will affect some 400 water agencies across the Golden State.*

ALAN RIQUELMY / July 3, 2024



*A nearby mountain peak still has a good amount of snow near the Phillips Station meadow in California. (Fred Greaves / California Department of Water Resources)*

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (CN) — Water agencies across California must implement efficiency changes after the state water board on Wednesday approved the Making Conservation a California Way of Life regulations.

The new regulations, stemming from two bills passed in 2018, will affect some 400 water agencies in the state that together deliver water to 95% of Californians. Smaller water agencies and households aren't affected by the regulations, though their effects are expected to trickle down.

The intention of the regulations is fourfold: using water wisely, ending water waste, improving local drought defenses and improving efficiency and drought

planning for agricultural water use.

The rulemaking process began about a year ago. The new regulations become effective Jan. 1, 2025.

“This is not a perfect regulation,” said E. Joaquin Esquivel, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board. “We can never have a perfect regulation.”

But, Esquivel said, the regulations the board passed Wednesday are significant.

Climate change is making the state’s dry and wet seasons more intense, while hot and dry summers are depleting snowpack and hurting water supplies. Action is required to add to the state’s water storage, tap into new supplies and encourage more efficiency.

The state water board said conservation is part of California’s water supply strategy, meant to tackle a 10% drop in water supply by 2040 because of hotter and drier conditions.

Existing action, along with the Making Conservation a California Way of Life regulations, is estimated to save some 500,000 acre-feet of water a year by 2040, water for over 1.4 million households.

Water suppliers affected by the new regulations will have a series of benchmarks they must meet. One goal for suppliers is convincing people to use water more wisely. Methods to achieve that goal can include outreach, higher water rates or rebates for replacing inefficient fixtures.

Agencies also have tailored water reduction goals they must meet over the years. They could face fines for not meeting the goals. Some agencies already are hitting their benchmarks.

According to water board staff, 31% of affected water agencies will have no reductions under 2040 requirements. Another 21% will face a 10% to 20% reduction, and 12% will have an over 30% reduction.

The changes come with a cost. While many speakers at Wednesday’s meeting praised some aspects of the regulations, they took issue with others.

Yasmeen Nubani, with the Twentynine Palms Water District, said she anticipates a cost of \$300,000 to \$900,000 for her agency to reach compliance.

Clark Elliott, a conservation specialist with the Desert Water Agency, said the regulations were improvements on prior drafts, though he said problems persist. Elliott was concerned about disadvantaged communities facing more pressure as regulatory costs compound over the years.

“The actions we take going forward are going to be louder than the words we say today in this room,” Elliott said.

Amy Talbot, water efficiency program manager with the Sacramento-area Regional Water Authority, said her coalition has already seen a 23% reduction in demand while population has grown 15%.

Talbot said the next three to five years will be critical, as agencies learn the feasibility of meeting the requirements.

“And I’m sure there will be some unexpected outcomes along the way,” she added.

Chelsea Haines, with the Association of California Water Agencies, was one of several people who said they appreciated the work and public process used in

the regulations' creation. She also called the implementation of the regulations "a major lift."

Success, Haines said, will be measured by the level of compliance.

"This is just the beginning of a multidecade process," she added.

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