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ENVIRONMENT

New California water limits will change Coachella Valley's landscape. Here's how



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Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 7:01 a.m. PT July 27, 2024 | Updated 9:43 a.m. PT July 30, 2024

New California water regulations likely will transform much of the Coachella Valley's landscape in coming years. But how quickly that shift will happen hinges on whether some local water suppliers win major exemptions written in to the new rules.

On paper, water agencies serving the scorched desert valley could be required to cut water use by a third or more under new rules rolled out by the State Water Quality Control Board in early July. Agencies out of compliance would face fines of up to \$10,000 a day.

But the drastic-sounding changes won't be enforced until 2027, and contain multiple avenues to dramatically scale back required cutbacks — caveats that infuriate some environmentalists.

Still, the mandates will mean gradual but big changes to the appearance of the overall valley, especially when combined with a separate "no ornamental turf" law that takes effect over the next five years.

Golf courses all will eventually be required to use recycled water, though active playing areas and city parks aren't going away. "Smart" sprinklers and hoses, low-flush toilets, efficient refrigerators and other in home appliances also will be the norm, wringing out every drop of possible savings.

Heavily watered ornamental lawns and medians likely will be phased out of multi-unit housing developments, business and public parking lots completely, replaced with native desert plantings or "no water" xeriscaping and rock gardens. Landscape irrigation, primarily for lawns, also known as turf, accounts for 70% to 80% of water use in wealthier communities.

Hefty water cuts for the Coachella Valley, at least on paper

According to a spreadsheet of more than 400 California water suppliers provided to The Desert Sun, the provisional cuts required in the Coachella Valley are:

City of Coachella: nothing now, 5% by 2040.

City of Indio: 6% near-term, 16% by 2040.

Coachella Valley Water District (six cities): 8% by 2035, 12% by 2040.

Myomas Dunes Water Co. (Bermuda Dunes): 12% near-term, 32% by 2040.

Mission Springs Water District (Desert Hot Springs): 19% near-term, 32% by 2040.

Desert Water Agency (Palm Springs, Cathedral City): 20% near-term, 32% by 2040.

Local agencies will step up use of familiar tactics to address the new policies, including charging higher prices to customers who use more than their allotted "tier" amount, and seeking grants and revenues to fund turf removal incentives.

In general, the estimated cuts are smaller for lower-income cities with fewer golf courses and lawns, and whose customers have long watched their water use to save money. Indio and Coachella, which supply some of the valley's lowest-income residents and already use far less water per household, say they likely can comply with the state's targeted reductions.

But agencies facing more aggressive cuts say they will push back, and fully plan to pursue "alternate pathways" in the regulation. One sharply reduces and slows cuts for "disadvantaged" communities — a broad category that could cover higher-income cities as well as destitute ones. As long as a community has a median household income below California's — currently nearly \$92,000 — a state water official said it can qualify.

"It's not super low," acknowledged Charlotte Ely, who heads climate and water strategy for the state water board and spent years helping design the new policy, which was adopted unanimously by the board on July 3.

Staff at the Desert Water Agency, which serves Palm Springs and Cathedral City and has historically had the state's highest water usage or close to it, says it plans to seek the "disadvantaged" community pathway, which would allow it to cut just 1% of water use each year, rather than 20% immediately and a third of it by 2040. The median income per household served by the agency is \$63,467 according to a state water board database.

Clark Elliott, conservation manager for the agency, said they should qualify because they serve pockets of lower-income residents in both cities as well.

Two smaller agencies cry foul

The general managers of Myoma Dunes and Mission Springs both say their small water agencies are being unfairly targeted for much higher reductions.

Mission Springs' General Manager Brian Macy said he is ready to drive state water officials around Desert Hot Springs in his car, as well as show them how little green there is in his city on Google Earth, to illustrate how few residential lawns and other non-recreational grass there is in the city. He said they'll also seek carve-outs for evaporative coolers that blow fans through wet pads, also known as "swamp coolers," which residents in their hilly areas often use instead of air conditioners, and for indoor cannabis growers, who use a large chunk of the city's water.

Macy said the city has already reduced water usage by 8% since 2021, and is ready to do more, and said their data doesn't easily line up with what the state is asking them to do. And he and others say they are unclear on what year or years the state is using as a baseline to set the percentages. He said since their peak usage in 2015, the city has ripped out the turf on the long main avenue in the city, for instance.

"Historically our use was really high...but there's a lot of grass that is no longer there," he said. He is hopeful that despite the steep cuts presented to them, they will have their rate of required reductions reduced.

"They just did the implementation," said Macy of the state water board. "It's going to be an iterative process each year, and hopefully it's going to get better and better."

Michele Donze, general manager of Myoma Dunes, said she isn't even looking at the percentages, because state staff have since sent out formulas for how to calculate needed savings, and continue to tweak the requirements. All the suppliers are still awaiting formulas for commercial and industrial businesses with separate water meters. She is wrangling politely with state staff over historical data, but is relieved to see recent language that could allow native palms and other trees to remain, with focused watering.

California water reductions could be 'much smaller'

State regulators agree with Macy and Donze, and say numbers will become much more precise as they work with individual agencies.

"The percent reductions in those spreadsheets are just estimates based on ...2017 through 2021 average use, so we're looking in the past to say, 'maybe this is how our efficiency standards will play out,'" said Ely. "But for many of these suppliers we expect the reductions will be smaller, and in some cases, much, much smaller."

The regulation is supposed to help address a likely annual statewide supply shortage of 10% by 2040 due to rapidly increasing climate change and overuse. If all goes as planned, an estimated half million-acre feet of water could eventually be conserved annually under the new regulation.

The regulation went through significant revisions that relaxed requirements to address concerns raised by the state legislative analyst's office, and by anxious local water suppliers. And more changes could come, angering environmentalists who say faster, deeper cuts are needed.

"The regulation does not meet the moment of growing water scarcity in California," Mark Gold, director of water scarcity solutions and environmental health for the Natural Resources Defense Council, told the San Francisco Chronicle. "A strong regulation will exist in 2040, but that's 15 years from now and there's going to be a heck of a lot of water scarcity over that period."

But the leading group representing the state's water agencies disagrees.

"Water suppliers will need to develop and implement new programs that require long-term customer behavior change and significant investments," Chelsea Haines of the Association of California Water Agencies, which represents more than 450 public agencies, told CalMatters. "It's an unprecedented approach that will require a level of commitment that we've never seen before."

State water board staff told The Desert Sun that the new regulation is one tool in its toolbox, along with others like stepping up desalination and water recycling, and building new dams and other infrastructure. They say they are confident the overall shortfall can be filled.

"I think that Californians have taken big and small steps to use water wisely over the last 10 years especially. But there's still a lot of untapped potential, and there is no doubt in my mind we can do more," Ely said.

And the hefty \$10,000 fines? Those are a "worst-case scenario" applicable during severe droughts, and only if a water district has blatantly disregarded other steps, including

conservation and cease-and-desist orders, according to water board staff. In fact, what's already playing out in the Coachella Valley illustrates on the ground what has pleased trade associations and angered environmentalists about the complex new rules.

"This new framework is really a much more nuanced and tailored approach," Ely said.

Still, by 2040, large reductions are supposed to be mandatory.

Donze in Bermuda Dunes agrees with the overall conservation goals, especially because the valley's aquifer is replenished with fast-dwindling Colorado River water, but knows she has an uphill battle in a 5-square-mile area that depends heavily on winter seasonal visitors. Myoma Dunes supplies about 9,000 residents, many living in large homeowner association developments that still have extensive rolling lawns. As a private agency they also can't apply for many of the turf removal grants and other public incentive programs.

In 2015, the agency was the top user of residential water statewide. Drought restrictions and aggressive efforts by Donze and her staff have already helped reduce usage by 30%, she said, particularly rebates to rip out turf, and using a tiered pricing system that sharply raises bills for customers who go above their allotted amount. But there's still a long way to go.

"You have people who will just pay up" and keep using higher amounts of water, she said, no matter what it costs. As for the big developments, some are pushing to take advantage of the agency's rebate funds for removing turf, while others aren't concerned yet.

"Right now the biggest thing is they don't quite see the urgency." she said. "You've got half the (homeowner) boards saying, 'save the money now ... and you've got half saying, 'let's keep (grass) in as long as possible ... you've got the snowbirds that still want to see a golf course, and all the green next to it."

Indio and Coachella confident they can achieve required cuts

Lower expected reductions are also partly based on scathing criticism from the state's Legislative Analysts Office of an earlier draft of the regulation that said poorer communities would be hit too hard. Those areas already typically use far less water per person.

Asked why his city is expected to cut just 5% over 15 years, Coachella utilities manager Castulo Estrada said in an email, "Historically, the city of Coachella has yielded the lowest water consumption per capita per day (in the valley) because our residents don't have as

much residential turf as they do in neighboring cities. The majority of our city has embraced traditional desert scape for two reasons: cost savings and aesthetic appeal."

He added, "A 5% reduction in Coachella's water usage by 2040 is feasible, but this benchmark must account for the forecasted growth in our budget and consumption as our city continues to grow and develop ... We are continuing to work with the state and other agencies to ensure that the goals for our city surrounding the new regulatory framework is based on the unique characteristics of our service area and provides us the flexibility to implement locally appropriate solutions."

Coachella already cut its water use by 6% in 2023 over the previous year, he said, thanks to conservation rebates and local efficient landscape ordinances. "While we continue experiencing growth within the city, our residents have embraced more drought friendly landscaping options," he said.

Indio officials are also not too worried about cutting 6% in the near term and 16% within 15 years.

"They seem like they're within reach, and the timeframes are well in place," Indio water authority general manager Reymundo Trejo said of the estimated cuts from the state, which he had not seen but which were shared with him by a reporter. "California always gives us time with these policy changes."

He noted that the agency has applied for and received more than \$3.3 million in state and federal grants for turf removal incentives, water meter replacement to better detect leaks and losses, toilet and washer rebates and promotional efforts to get the word out. The money is expected to be spent by December 2025.

"I think we have a game plan in place that has legs, and it has a good framework to to meet those goals. We have the funds in place, we have support from the (city council,), we're still offering various attractive turf removal programs, and so we're prepared, we're not caught flat-footed."

Macy with Mission Springs bristles at being in the same, highest category of cuts as Palm Springs and Bermuda Dunes, saying lower income residents in his area with less to spend on fancy landscaping should be more aligned with Coachella's.

Defining disadvantaged

Desert Water Agency, which serves Palm Springs and Cathedral City, must technically cut a fifth of its water use by next year, and a third within 15 years, but for the first two years, only record-keeping is actually required. Conservation manager Elliott says the valley's healthy aquifer reserves and a companion state law banning use of drinking water for ornamental lawns at homeowner associations and in city areas between 2028 and 2029 mean the agency is in good shape to achieve conservation without mandatory cuts for all customers. That new law includes the lavishly watered Palm Springs Airport's grassy grounds, which agency board members have complained about.

But they are also planning to apply for variances, Elliott said, and for the "alternate pathway" that allows "disadvantaged" communities with high water use to cut just 1% of water use annually, and possibly others. If they are approved, and Elliott said he expects they will be, they could avoid having to meet the state's more draconian objectives until 2040, and even then, a water board staffer said a community could seek an extension.

Elliott stressed that everyone needs to do their part.

"We're not seeking dramatic change, but rather using our incentive and other conservation programs to show a consistent good faith effort to conserve to the state. Through this, DWA expects to be able to stay in compliance with the alternative compliance pathways of the regulation. It still is not easy, but with the assistance of our passionate and engaged customers we believe it is achievable."

How much water is Desert Water Agency saving?

The agency, which has in the past disagreed sharply with the state's calculations of its water use, is also doublechecking that its more recent calculations properly include climate and evapotranspiration differences, as well as allowing for short-term visitors and tourists. Elliott said in an email that it reduced total water consumption from 2020 to 2023 by about 8.3%. "That is a savings of more than 800 million gallons when comparing the two years."

Using those years avoids a disagreement it had with the state in 2021, during the height of the recent drought, when Sacramento regulators said the agency was the third-highest water user statewide. The agency at the time disputed that, but also said because they serve a hot inland area, not a cooler coastal one, water usage would always be higher than in greater Los Angeles, for instance.

Largest agency expects to meet state's goals

Coachella Valley Water District, the regions' largest supplier, is not required to make short-term reductions, but a spokeswoman there said they must make cuts in the next 10 to 15 years.

CVWD spokeswoman Lorraine Garcia said while they are awaiting final numbers based on commercial industrial data analysis and any variances or alternate pathways the state water board approves, they expect to be able to make the cuts, provided their customers cooperate. The agency serves nearly 300,000 customers in Cathedral City, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Palm Desert, and Rancho Mirage, as well as small parts of Imperial and San Diego counties.

"While this regulation states that it does not apply to individual customers but to water agencies, customers will have to become more water efficient," Garcia said in an email, noting so far, they are expected to cut 8% through 2035 and 12% by 2040, and expect most of that to come from outdoor water use.

"To achieve this target, CVWD will continue our current conservation funding of \$6 million per year, including annual rebate program funding of \$3 million and we will seek grants for additional funding," she said. "CVWD will also focus on removing non-functional turf, enhancing our water waste enforcement through 2030, and re-evaluating what additional actions may be necessary to meet our 2035 water use efficiency target."

Water bans or not?

Asked if there could be mandatory cuts at any point, she said, "I would ask the state water board if they plan on mandatory water cuts. Or what they plan for noncompliance. CVWD plans on complying and is already working on outreach."

A top state water staffer said they do not anticipate mandatory cuts or even hefty fines. In no case will the regulation lead to municipal water shut-offs, he said.

"The board will not be shutting off water to a city," said James Nachbaur, director of research, planning and performance for the state water agency. The regulation is not about arbitrary actions ... through conservation orders the board can direct a supplier to do something but ... we're not throttling off people's water."

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