

California cut water use more than 20 percent in December

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 2-4-15

It took a whole year of trying, but in December California at last achieved Gov. Jerry Brown's directive to slash water use 20 percent in response to the continuing drought.

Californians collectively cut their water consumption by 22.2 percent in December compared to the prior year, based on reports filed by urban water agencies with the State Water Resources Control Board. It was the first time the state as a whole reached that goal since Brown ordered the 20 percent reduction as part of his January 2014 emergency drought declaration.

"That's good news, indeed," water board chairwoman Felicia Marcus said at a meeting Tuesday in Sacramento. "If I had a little sparkler, I would probably be lighting it right now."

The water board ordered local agencies to begin submitting monthly water use data in June so it could track compliance with the 20 percent order. It's been an uncertain path ever since, as conservation efforts improved through August – when water use fell 11.5 percent compared with August 2013 – then waned in October.

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Sierra snowpack dismal for January; fourth year of drought looks likely

Rain for Sacramento area on the way, but not much snow for the Sierra

For much of that time, the Sacramento River region – long known for profligate water use – has led the state in cutting consumption. It consistently has posted double-digit conservation progress each month since June. In some months, it was the only region to reach or exceed 20 percent. In December, the region cut water use by 21.4 percent compared to the same month in 2013.

A notable laggard has been the state's South Coast region – including Los Angeles and San Diego – which has not exceeded single digits. That changed in December, however, as the South Coast boosted its conservation progress to 23.2 percent. As the most populous region, this helped the state as a whole surpass the 20 percent goal.

The San Joaquin River region, which includes Fresno and Modesto, cut water consumption by 18.9 percent in December compared with the prior year.

The data also revealed that average per-capita water consumption across California fell to 67 gallons per day in December. That compares with 140 gallons recorded in June, and an annual average of 105 gallons reported in 2009.

Twenty percent of the state in December used less than 55 gallons per person per day. This is what the state Department of Water Resources considers the "performance standard" for indoor water use. The Sacramento River region used 77 gallons per capita per day in December, while the San Joaquin River region was at 74 gallons.

Among the lowest in the state were the cities of San Diego, at 46 gallons, and San Francisco, about 40 gallons.

Katheryn Landau, an environmental scientist at the water board, said Californians over the past seven months have saved more than 413,000 acre-feet of water. That is nearly half the volume of Folsom Reservoir and enough water to serve 1.8 million people for a year.

“It indicates how the water conservation efforts we’ve taken are having a really positive impact,” said Landau.

The data come with a number of caveats, however. The big one is that December 2014 was much cooler and wetter than the same month in 2013, which undoubtedly boosted water conservation by reducing the need for landscape irrigation. December also is typically one of the lowest water use months of the year, so it may not be a good indicator of long-term performance.

January data may not look as good, because the month that just ended was the driest January in recorded history for many locations in the state, including Sacramento. The capital city saw just .01 inch of rainfall in January. The monthly average is about 4 inches.

With that comes virtual certainty that California now faces a fourth straight drought year.

“Obviously, that raises a couple of concerns,” said Eric Oppenheimer, a member of the water board’s office of research and planning. “There’s a chance we could see the conservation numbers erode for January. We hope that people still will keep their outdoor irrigation off or to a minimum as we move through February, especially if it starts raining again this weekend.”

A series of wet storms is forecast to arrive late Thursday across Northern California, the first since before Christmas. But the storms are expected to be warm, meaning they may not add significantly to the mountain snowpack that helps California survive its long, dry summers.

Officials are turning their attention to revving up their conservation message for 2015. The water board on Feb. 17 plans to consider imposing additional rules on local water agencies to require more savings. This could include, among other things, stricter limits on outdoor landscape irrigation as the warm spring months approach.

Other efforts will focus on expanding the conservation message to target business and industrial users, and encouraging people to turn their newfound conservation practices into permanent habits.

“Our number one plan is making conservation a way of life for California,” said water board member Steven Moore. “Every citizen should know where their water comes from, how much they use, and where their water goes when they’re done with it. That’s going to take incredible effort.”