

California urban water users must get serious about conservation

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California is in the midst of its fourth consecutive drought year, and based on a new study by Stanford scientists, it appears to be a long-time weather pattern. The December downpours were just a nice distraction.

The state has to get serious about conserving water. Suggestions are not enough.

Emergency regulations proposed Friday by the State Water Resources Board staff would be a start, but permanent regulations are needed, and communities, at least region by region, need to be on the same page as to how to accomplish goals. Regulation by the state can help enormously by shoring up local programs like the one the Santa Clara Valley Water District is discussing this month.

Gov. Jerry Brown has called for a 20 percent reduction in water use this year, but we are nowhere close. Statewide, homes and businesses cut their water use by 8.8 percent in January compared with January 2013. The Bay Area did worse, reducing by just 3.3 percent.

Brown likes to let local governments decide on regulations. We can see differences in regions -- say, Monterey v. Fresno -- but saying anything goes city to city is confusing in a statewide crisis.

For example, the local water district will have a smaller supply to sell this year and needs to get people to conserve. But only cities and counties can enforce rules, and if each municipality has its own set, it complicates the district's work, including education campaigns.

This is one of the factors in the district's proposal for a 30 percent rate increase that will be on April's agenda. We have yet to review whether that much is warranted -- the district is still recovering from a reputation of profligacy -- but a serious drought will increase district costs.

In Santa Clara County, Morgan Hill has become a model in conservation by limiting landscape watering to one day a week, among other things. Since watering lawns accounts for about half of California's household water use, this would go a long way toward meeting conservation goals if it were broadly adopted.

The State Water Resources Control Board's proposal allows local water agencies to come up with their own conservation plans, but if they're not meeting the 20 percent goal, it says they should limit yard and landscape watering to two days a week. The board calls for fines of up to \$500, but enforcement is up to municipalities.

Lower water use has to become the norm. Agriculture can adjust by shifting from, say, almond orchards back to less water-intensive crops, but even if it does, cities will need to step up. Residents shouldn't be waiting to get started.