

California drought: 84 percent of water agencies choose zero as conservation target

Paul Rogers, East Bay Times, 8-16-16

Under fire from water agencies who were losing millions of dollars in lost water sales, Gov. Jerry Brown's administration two months ago dropped all mandatory water conservation targets and allowed cities, water districts and private water companies across the state to set their own targets.

Now, the results are in: 343 urban water agencies -- or 84 percent of the 411 largest in the state -- gave themselves a conservation target of zero for the rest of this year.

When the figures were released Tuesday, state water board officials defended their decision. But critics said the new numbers proved that the move was reckless, given that half the state is still in a severe drought.

Among those with "zero" as their targets were most of the biggest water departments and agencies in California, representing tens of millions of people. They include the cities of San Francisco, San Diego and Sacramento, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the East Bay Municipal Utility District, the Contra Costa Water District and the Marin Municipal Water District.

The Alameda County Water District and the cities of Palo Alto, Fresno and Riverside also set targets of zero.

The San Jose Water Co., which serves 1 million people, chose a conservation target of 2 percent compared with 2013, the baseline year. East Palo Alto and Santa Cruz chose 8 percent, Sunnyvale 5 percent and Daly City 4 percent.

Even as they emphasized that California's five-year drought is not over, Brown administration officials worked Tuesday to put the best face on the new numbers.

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board, noted that her agency required each water provider to pass a "stress test" that demonstrated it had enough water either in reservoirs, groundwater storage or contracts with other agencies to get by in case the drought continues for another three years.

The fact that so many providers selected zero, she contended, demonstrates they are prepared.

Also, she noted, this past winter, many parts of the state received near-normal rainfall, which filled large Northern California reservoirs such as Shasta and Oroville.

"We were trying to be reasonable given how changed the conditions were," Marcus said.

But some water experts and environmentalists called the decision to drop all mandatory targets shortsighted.

"In the midst of the hottest summer on record and while we fight off raging wildfires throughout the state, allowing virtually every water supplier in the state to abandon mandatory conservation is a terrible message to send to Californians," said Tracy Quinn, a water policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

State officials confirmed Tuesday that although they required each agency to send in paperwork documenting its projected supply and demand, they did not verify the numbers and took the agencies at their word.

"We're not going to go looking under rocks to see if they were fudging," said Max Gomberg, climate and conservation manager for the state water board. "If somebody else discovers that, the board does retain the authority to take action."

The original rules passed by the state water board took effect in June 2015. The board gave all 411 cities and other water providers a mandatory state target ranging from 8 percent to 36 percent.

The target was based on how much water each area was using per capita. Cities that already had low water use - - such as Santa Cruz, East Palo Alto and Hayward -- were given targets of only 8 percent, while cities with large per capita use, such as Beverly Hills and Bakersfield, were given targets of 36 percent.

Most cities and water agencies met their targets.

From June 2015 to March 2016, Brown asked Californians to cut water use 25 percent overall in urban areas compared with 2013. They reduced water use by 23.9 percent.

That was a major improvement from the prior year. In 2014, when Brown asked for a voluntary 20 percent reduction, most cities, private water companies and water districts responded with voluntary measures. The result was only a 9.7 percent drop statewide in water use.

On Tuesday, Marcus said that state water board officials will be watching water figures closely. If by January, the winter has not delivered significant rains and conservation is lagging, mandatory rules could come back, she said.

"We will be prepared to step back in with top-down standards come January if necessary," Marcus said. "We hope it won't be, but we'll be ready if it is."

She also noted that Californians in June reduced water use by an impressive 21.5 percent compared with the 2013 baseline, even though the state had dropped the mandatory targets.

State board officials reported Tuesday that nine providers, including Ukiah, Carpinteria and Mountain House Community Services District, still have not submitted their conservation targets, even though the deadline was two months ago. Another 32 providers, or 8 percent, will keep in place the state targets previously assigned to them. And 36 indicated they will choose a target ranging from 1 percent to 20 percent.

Of note: 160 providers, representing half of the state's population and including most in Santa Clara County, kept in place some voluntary conservation targets for their customers.

Even though San Jose Water Co., for example, reported to the state a mandatory conservation target of 2 percent, which reflects the amount of savings it would need if the drought dragged on three more years, the company is asking customers to voluntarily cut water use by 20 percent compared with 2013. That's because the area's wholesale water provider, the Santa Clara Valley Water District, asked for a 20 percent cut to reduce the risk of heavy groundwater pumping.

But if local agencies like San Jose Water fail to meet those voluntary targets, they will face no enforcement actions from the state.

Water industry officials said the new system returns control to locals, where they said it should be. And, they argued, even though many agencies chose zero as a target, they are not giving up on water conservation and are continuing public relations campaigns and incentives to get people not to waste water.

Said Dave Bolland, special projects manager with the Association of California Water Agencies:

"We have been trying to frame the story as 'Zero doesn't mean zero.' "