

California grapples with pivot from drought rules to long-term water strategy

Ian James , The Desert Sun, 1-19-17

With storms drenching much of California and snow blanketing the Sierra Nevada, the state's top water regulators are grappling with how to shift from conservation rules devised during more than five years of drought to a long-term strategy for using water more sustainably.

The State Water Resources Control Board plans to decide in February whether to extend the current drought regulations, which require local water districts to report on monthly water use and include measures such as prohibiting outdoor watering for 48 hours after rainstorms.

The emergency drought regulations for urban areas are set to expire at the end of February, and the state board's staff is proposing to stick with those temporary rules for now while simultaneously putting in place a long-term conservation plan ordered by Gov. Jerry Brown.

State officials said the idea of keeping the temporary drought rules in effect while storms are refilling reservoirs is geared toward taking a wait-and-see approach halfway through the winter, and also keeping in place a tracking system for water-saving performance in cities and towns across the state.

Wet weather has pushed Northern California out of drought conditions, and rains have been improving the water outlook in Southern California as well. As of this week, the U.S. Drought Monitor website shows severe drought conditions now cover 44 percent of the state – a swath stretching from the Central Valley across Southern California. That's down from nearly 62 percent of the state three months ago.

"The recovery overall is looking great," said Max Gomberg, climate and conservation manager for the state board. "But there are still regions of the state where there are still significant and lingering drought impacts."

He spoke Wednesday during a meeting in Sacramento, saying he and other water managers think it makes sense to leave the regulations in effect for now to keep encouraging conservation and avoid "that step where after the rain we go back to apathy."

Board member Steven Moore mentioned a famous and often-cited observation by John Steinbeck in the novel "East of Eden:" "And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way."

While conservation advocates have raised concerns about the possibility of backsliding on water-saving progress as the drought wanes, many water districts have called for the state to drop the emergency conservation regulations for urban areas. The drought rules were first adopted in May 2015 and were extended in February 2016, then amended in May 2016 to drop mandatory conservation targets.

The Association of California Water Agencies, which represents more than 430 agencies, said in a letter to the state board that the emergency regulation should be allowed to expire. The association said "there is no longer a statewide drought emergency to justify extending" the drought regulations.

At Wednesday's meeting, many representatives of water districts emphasized to the board that the public no longer sees a drought emergency.

"Certainly we would ask that the emergency regulations expire. Emergency regulations are for emergencies," Ashley Metzger, outreach and conservation manager for the Desert Water Agency. "Local water management decisions should be in local hands during times like this."

The Association of California Water Agencies suggested the state could continue using a "stress test" method of assessing the need for conservation measures in some communities where water supplies are calculated to be insufficient to meet normal demands.

Some officials from water districts said they wouldn't oppose continuing to submit monthly reports on water use. But they also pointed out that the huge storms in the past month have dramatically boosted the levels of major Northern California reservoirs. As a result, state officials this week increased their projection of how much water they'll be able to deliver this year through the canals and pipelines of the State Water Project. Water districts in Southern California now can count on receiving 60 percent of their full water deliveries, up from a previous estimate of 45 percent.

Still, a proposal drafted by the state board's staff points out that history has shown rains can stop suddenly partway through winter, and that years of drought have left significant water deficits, especially in aquifers depleted by excessive pumping. The document noted that "there's no rulebook for when a drought is declared or rescinded."

The state water board is scheduled to decide on Feb. 7 whether to extend the drought rules, and if so for how long.

"We have a lot to think about," Moore said. "Expiration of the regulation, from my standpoint, it's on the table. You know, it's one of the things that could happen."

Gomberg stressed it will be crucial to continue having data on water use available for transparency, public awareness and long-term planning.

Board Chair Felicia Marcus agreed: "The whole movement is towards having data available so that we can do the kind of analytics that are important for making good public policy decisions."

Coachella Valley water conservation

This chart shows the most recent monthly reductions in water use by customers of the Coachella Valley's water suppliers, as compared to the same months in 2013, which state officials are using as a baseline. Cumulative water-savings are shown since June 2015, when the state began monthly tracking.

Tracking monthly water use in cities and towns has enabled regulators to spot problem areas and also gauge statewide progress. The latest statewide data released this month showed cumulative water-savings of 22.6 percent between June 2015 and November 2016 as compared with the same months in 2013, which is being used as a baseline year.

Gomberg said the goal is to continue with a transparent account of water use and a basic level of prohibitions against water waste.

“We want to make sure that, drought or no drought, water is not being wasted in California because we have a growing population and economy, we’re dealing with climate change, and we can no longer afford to be wasteful with our water,” Gomberg said. “Californians have done a tremendous job responding during this drought, and over the long-term we need to be stingier with our water use than we have been in the past.”

Seeking to pivot to larger water challenges that transcend a single drought, state officials are working on a long-term conservation plan. The draft plan, titled “Making Water Conservation a California Way of Life,” was prepared in response to an executive order signed by Brown in May.

The plan calls for setting new community-specific conservation targets. It also includes a variety of broad goals such as improving water data, tracking water use by businesses, encouraging agencies to fix water leaks, requiring agricultural districts to submit more information about water use, and permanently banning practices such as hosing off driveways, among other things.

This week a group of 36 water and climate scientists voiced support for the plan in a [letter](#) to Brown. They said California has made dramatic progress in using water more efficiently in all sectors, from agriculture to homes, and that those efforts need to be accelerated.

“Business as usual is not an option; California simply does not have enough water to support our old ways,” they said in the letter, noting that the state board over the past century has issued rights to about five times more water than the total amount of surface water runoff in an average year.

“We are on an unsustainable path,” the scientists said. They pointed out that in many areas of the San Joaquin Valley groundwater levels have plummeted to more than 100 feet below previous historic lows, and that “while some groundwater recharge occurs in wet years, it is more than offset by over-pumping in dry and even average years.”

They said California has an opportunity to be a national leader in managing water smartly, and they recommended a list of steps, among them prioritizing conservation and efficiency, improving the collection of water data, and setting local targets that take into account local water supplies and the changing climate.