

California drought: Newsom orders tighter water conservation rules

As drought worsens, Californians face most far-reaching water conservation rules since 2016.



An exposed dry bed is seen at Lake Mendocino near Ukiah, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021. Despite some rain in October and December, the past three months have been dry, and on Monday March 28, 2022, the lake was just 36% full. (AP Photo/Haven Daley)

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PUBLISHED: March 28, 2022 at 2:00 p.m. | UPDATED: March 29, 2022 at 11:37 a.m.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday ordered water agencies around the state to tighten water conservation rules, as the winter rainy season comes to a close with California heading into a third year of severe drought.

The move is the most far-reaching statewide water restriction since 2016, during California's last drought.

"While we have made historic investments to protect our communities, economy and ecosystems from the worsening drought across the West, it is clear we need to do more," Newsom said. "Today, I am calling on local water agencies to implement more aggressive water conservation measures."

But Newsom did not issue mandatory statewide water cuts with fines for water districts and cities that fall short, as former Gov. Jerry Brown did in 2015. Rather, Newsom's order lets each local water provider set its own rules.

"What we learned from the last drought is that it's really important to listen to locals," said Jared Blumenfeld, secretary of the California



Under [state law](#), water providers are required to draw up such drought plans every five years, with six different levels of restrictions depending on the severity of each drought. Level 6 is the most severe.

Level 2 varies by provider. But in most cases, it requires limits on the number of days a week that residents can irrigate landscaping, to make up an overall water shortfall of 10% to 20%. In some areas, level 2 also triggers higher rates or penalties for residents who use more than a set amount of water.

The specifics for each water provider are expected to be rolled out in the coming weeks. The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which serves 1.4 million people in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, is currently at Level 1 in its plan, and is allowing lawn watering three days a week. But San Jose Water Company, which serves 1 million people in the South Bay, already is at level 3, which limits lawn watering to two days a week and sets higher rates-per gallon for customers who use the most water.

Blumenfeld said 59% of the state's urban water suppliers have not yet put level 2 in place.

Some water experts welcomed the new rules, but said they could cause confusion with the public, since neighboring cities may have different restrictions.

"It's a step in the right direction," said Heather Cooley, research director at the non-profit Pacific Institute, a water think tank in Oakland. "I'm surprised to learn that more water suppliers aren't already at level 2. I am also concerned that level 2 won't be enough, given the severity of the drought."

Newsom also on Monday directed state regulators to issue rules prohibiting watering decorative grass at industrial and commercial buildings. Those rules will not affect residential lawns, or recreational turf, such as baseball and soccer fields at parks and schools.

Newsom has been facing increasing calls to do more to address the state's worsening drought.

Most of the state's biggest reservoirs are depleted after three dry years, and little rain is expected until next fall. The largest reservoir in California, Shasta, near Redding, is currently just 38% full. The second largest, Oroville, in Butte County, is 47% full.

The Sierra Nevada snowpack — the source of nearly one-third of California's drinking water — hit 168% of normal on New Year's Day after big storms in October and December. But with almost no rain and snow since then, the snowpack Monday had fallen to a dismal 39% of its historical average for that date.



On March 1, 2022, Sean de Guzman, manager of the California Department of Water Resources Snow Surveys and Water Supply Forecasting Unit, Nick Ellis, associate electrical engineer, DWR Statewide Monitoring Network Unit, and Lauren Alkire, water resources engineer, DWR Snow Surveys and Water Supply Forecasting Unit, conduct a media snow survey at Phillips Station in the Sierra Nevada, 90 miles east of Sacramento off Highway 50 in El Dorado County. (Photo: Florence Low / California Department of Water Resources)



Despite Sunday night's rain, March also will finish with below-average rain and snow.

Overall, 93% of California is in a severe drought now — up from 65% a year ago, including every Bay Area county and Los Angeles, according to the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#), a weekly report put out by the federal government and the University of Nebraska.

Last July, Newsom declared a drought emergency and asked urban California residents to voluntarily reduce water use 15% from 2020 levels.

They have missed that target by a wide margin.



Governor Gavin Newsom is seen immediately after a press conference concluded on the dry Lake Mendocino lake bed on April 21, 2021. (Photo: Andrew Innerarity/ California Department of Water Resources)

Cumulatively, Californians reduced urban water use statewide by just 6.4% from July through January — less than half of Newsom's target — compared to the same time period in 2020, the State Water Resources Control Board [announced earlier this month](#). Southern Californians cut back by only 5.1% while Bay Area residents reduced by 11%.

Some large water agencies have pushed back against statewide mandatory cuts, urging Newsom to allow them more flexibility. Some say they have built new reservoirs or expanded water recycling, or in the case of San Diego, built a \$1 billion desalination plant, and shouldn't have the same restrictions as agencies that have not done enough to boost supplies. Water agencies also lose millions of dollars when residents conserve due to a drop in water sales, unless they raise rates.

During California's last drought, from 2012 to 2016, then-Gov. Brown at first issued a voluntary call for conservation. But when Californians failed to meet his targets and the drought worsened, Brown issued a 25% mandatory urban water use rule on April 1, 2015, with targets and fines for agencies that failed to meet the goal.

The rules worked. Between June 2015 and April 2016, when mandatory rules were in effect, urban Californians cut water use by 24.5%.

That drought ended in 2017 with a series of huge atmospheric river storms. Since then, after modest precipitation in 2018 and 2019, the three most recent years 2020, 2021 and 2022 have all been drier-than-normal.





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