

No, California's drought isn't over. Here's why.



BY RACHEL BECKER, JANUARY 4, 2022 UPDATED JANUARY 5, 2022



Sprinklers water a lawn in Sacramento on July 15, 2014, during the last drought. Photo by Rich Pedroncelli, AP Photo

IN SUMMARY

California today issued emergency drought rules aimed at wasteful water use. Although snowpack is 150% of average today, climatologists predict dry conditions for the rest of the season. And conservation still lags.

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In a clear sign that the drought persists, California today [adopted new emergency regulations](#) aimed at stopping residents from wasting the state’s precious water.

The rules [ban practices](#) such as hosing down sidewalks and driveways with drinking water, washing cars without a shutoff nozzle on the hose and irrigating lawns and gardens too soon after rain.

Approved unanimously by the State Water Resources Control Board, the mandates could take effect as soon as Jan. 15 and have a one-year expiration date unless extended. Fines can reach as high as \$500, but enforcement will be spotty: Local governments and water agencies are allowed to enforce them at their discretion, and they will largely be complaint-based.

“There’s not going to be like a statewide force of water cops or anything like that,” said [Eric Oppenheimer](#), the water board’s chief deputy director.



LESSONS LEARNED: DROUGHT THEN AND NOW

A CalMatters series investigates what’s improved and what’s worsened since the last drought — and vividly portrays the impacts on California’s places and people.

California's drought is not over despite a bounty of snowfall and rain over the past month: California's snowpack — a critical source of water — is **150% of average** for Jan. 4. But with three months left of the wet season, it's not enough to bring an end to the severe drought and water shortages.

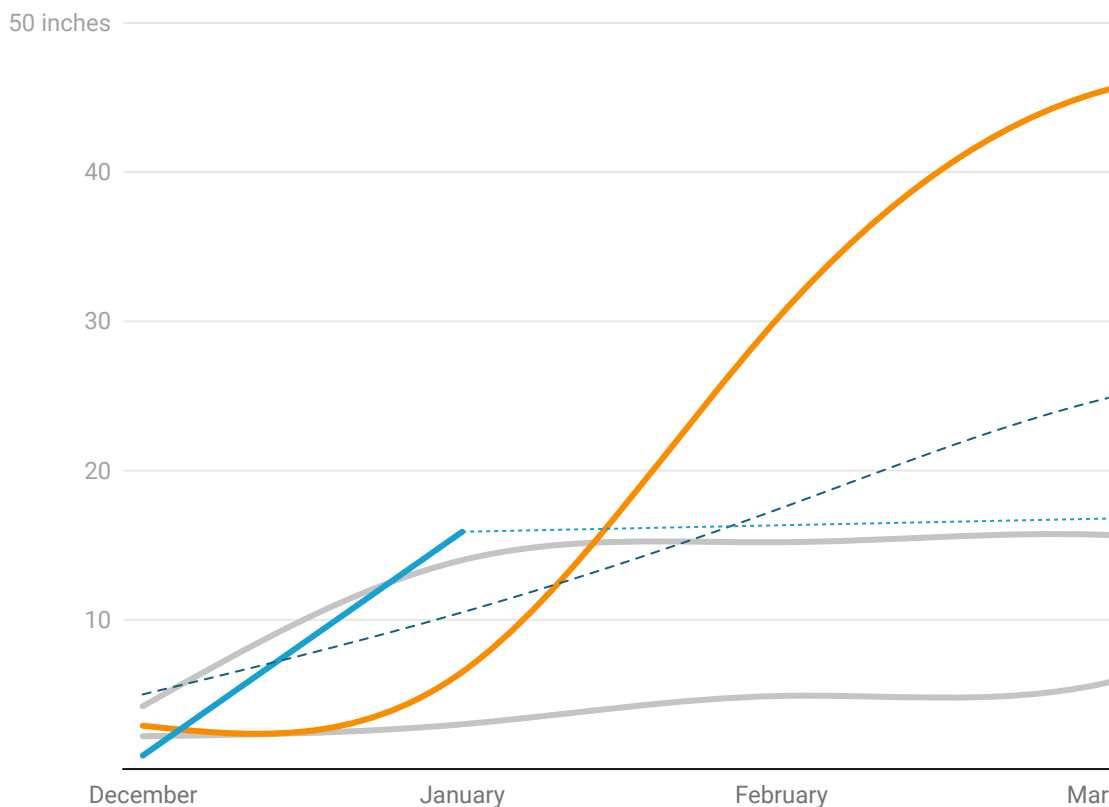
California still needs about another foot of snow water content — the amount of water contained in the snowpack — by the end of March to reach its historic seasonal average, according to the state data. Almost 16 inches of snow water content have accumulated **by today**.

“December alone will not end the drought, clearly,” said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager for the Department of Water Resources. “December was wonderful, but now we just hope it keeps on going.”

Springtime snow is key to ending the drought

Lots of snow in December isn't enough to end California's drought. In fact, about the same amount of snow that has fallen since Dec. 1 needs to fall by the end of March to reach the state's historic average.

That sounds easy to achieve, but it's not: In 2013 and 2018, snowfall was abundant through January but was sparse for the rest of the season, leading to below-average snowpack. On the other hand, in 2017, it snowed throughout the entire spring, resulting in a higher than average amounts.



The amount of water now stored is actually worse than last year at this time: The state's reservoirs in December were projected to contain about 78% of average — compared to about 82% in 2020.

Moderate to exceptional drought still grips the entire state, and a soggy start to the rainy season does not guarantee even an average water year. California has felt that false hope before: **In 2013**, during the last record-breaking drought, a wet December turned into a dry January and February.

Climatologists predict that the state will dry out during the rest of the winter and spring.

“After we get through this weather system this week, things go dry. And the expectations are a drier than average January, February and March,” said California’s state climatologist **Michael Anderson**.

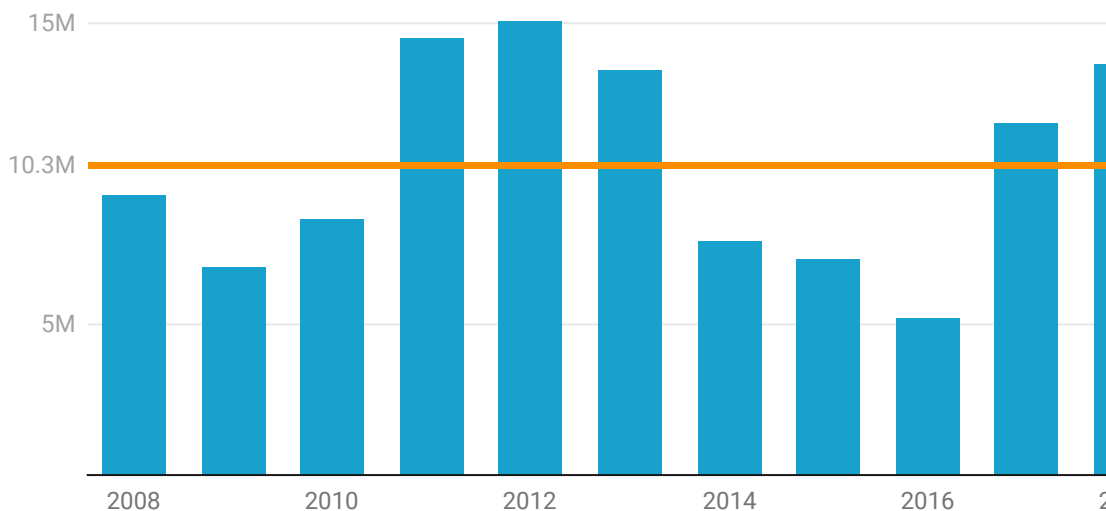
And conservation still lags. California Gov. Gavin Newsom in July called for Californians to **voluntarily cut water use** by 15% in the face of the ongoing drought. But state officials today announced statewide savings of only 6% from July to November compared to last year.

November, a dry month, saw only a 6.8% reduction in water use — down from 13.3% in October, which saw torrential rains. The greatest savings came from the northern half of the state; water use increased slightly by 0.8% in Southern California.

“You want to kiss every snowflake and every raindrop that comes down, because it was just so bad,” said Felicia Marcus, who chaired the State Water Resources Control Board under Gov. Jerry Brown during the last drought. “At the same time, we’ve got to exercise our efficiency muscles every way we can, all the time.”

Water stored in California’s reservoirs is below average

On Jan. 1, major reservoirs contained 7 million acre feet of water, only about two thirds of the 10.3 million historic average.



CalMatters used 25 major reservoirs to calculate the amount of stored water in the system.

Similar [restrictions on wasteful water use](#) were temporarily enacted during the last drought under former Governor Jerry Brown, who also issued [a statewide water conservation mandate](#).

In October, Newsom instructed regulators at the State Water Resources Control Board to [consider once again barring wasteful water uses](#) when he extended the drought emergency statewide.

The emergency rules adopted today take aim at residents as well as homeowners associations, which can no longer penalize residents for brown lawns and drought-tolerant landscaping plants. Local governments may no longer use drinking water to irrigate ornamental turf on street medians.

The new rules do not affect agriculture, the leading user of water in California. And both public commenters and board member Laurel Firestone raised concerns about how penalties could affect low-income Californians — spurring the board to add new language requiring warnings and fees based on the recipient’s ability to pay.

“This is not the most effective, or even in my mind appropriate policy approach to save water when we're in a drought emergency,” said board member [Laurel Firestone](#), who called for a more systemic approach rather than individual penalties. “Unfortunately, like in the last drought, we don't have a more appropriate and effective policy developed that we go to in drought emergencies.”

CalMatters water and drought tracker



1045

**NUMBER OF DAYS
SINCE THE DROUGHT
BEGAN**

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The state's efforts to [make permanent](#) the emergency water waste rules [enacted during the last drought](#) faced opposition from powerful urban and agricultural water interests, and ultimately fizzled.

But many local water agencies have already adopted their own rules.

Sacramento, for instance, has prohibited a number of wasteful water uses since 2017, including washing down sidewalks and irrigating so much that it overflows onto sidewalks or streets.

The utilities department “takes an education-first approach to solving water waste by providing notices to residents before issuing any fines,” Carlos Eliason, a spokesperson for the department, said in an email. Fines, however, can be issued to repeat offenders, and the allowable amount has doubled due to the city’s “Water Alert,” currently ranging from \$50 to \$1,000.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District also restricts certain wasteful water uses but hasn’t issued any fines over the past year, said spokesperson Tracie Morales.

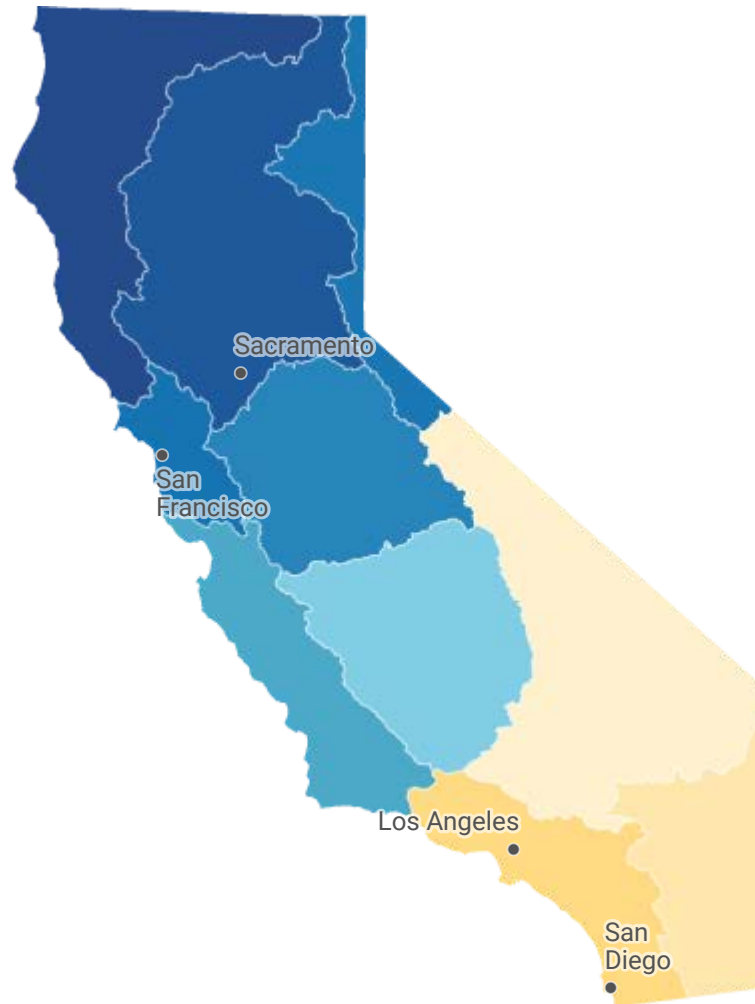
“Most of our water waste investigations are resolved by reaching out to our customers and providing education and resources, without having to resort to enforcement,” Morales said. However, she said the district can “escalate to a formal warning letter letting them know that we may charge them for additional monitoring, and that we have the right to install a flow restrictor or even shut off their water.”

“There is nothing that obligates us to take specific action and enforce" the state's new regulations, Morales said. She added, however, that the district might consider updating its rules to more closely match the state’s wording.

Californians used nearly 7% less water in their homes during November 2021 compared to November 2020.

Residents of the North Coast reduced their household water usage by roughly 26%, while residents of the highly populated South Coast used about 0.8% more water during the same period.

Percent reduction in household water usage



Officials couldn't say how much water the regulations adopted today are expected to save. Instead, they said, the focus is largely on educating consumers, rather than collecting fines.

"I don't believe that there were any fines of up to \$500. There were, I believe, a small handful throughout the state of smaller fines after multiple levels of warnings and outreach," said David Rose, senior staff counsel with the water board. "Mostly what the suppliers chose to do was to implement their own existing water waste or water use restrictions as opposed to the board's regulation."

The timing of the decision after such a soggy start to the water year “wreaks havoc with messaging,” Marcus said.

But it’s a change that she said she hopes will persist longer term — which would require a different regulatory process.

“To me, these rules are sort of the least we can do. They're primarily common sense.”

Julie Cart contributed to this story.

CalMatters environment coverage is supported by grants from the 11th Hour Project and Len and Mary Anne Baker.

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by Erica Yee , DECEMBER 21, 2021