

In Sharp Reversal, California Suspends Water Restrictions

By [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#) and [IAN LOVETT](#) MAY 18, 2016

Photo



Water conservation specialists checking out a sprinkler system in Sacramento in April 2015. Credit Max Whittaker for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — California on Wednesday suspended its [mandatory](#) statewide 25 percent reduction in urban water use, telling local communities to set their own conservation standards after a relatively wet winter and a year of enormous savings in urban water use.

The new rules are a sharp change in policy for a state struggling to manage one of the worst droughts in its history. They came after a winter in which El Niño storms fell short of what meteorologists projected — particularly in the southern part of the state — but still partly filled parched reservoirs in Northern California and, more critically, partly replenished the mountain snowpacks that provide water into the spring and summer.

And Californians, responding to an executive order issued in April last year by Gov. [Jerry Brown](#), reduced their use of potable urban water by 24 percent compared with 2013 levels. Officials said they were hopeful that reduction would prove permanent because of changes in water use such as replacing lawns with drought-tolerant shrubs.

The rules do not apply to agriculture, which is covered by different regulations and makes up the bulk of water use in the state. Cuts in supply based on seniority were imposed in the last year. Some of them have been rolled back already as water has become more available.

The rules, adopted by the [State Water Resources Control Board](#), are likely to mean a huge rollback — and in some places, an elimination — of water reduction mandates that have forced people, businesses and governments to curb watering of gardens and lawns, take shorter showers and flush toilets less frequently.

State officials said that the drought, already in its fifth year, was not over and that Californians had to adapt to permanently more arid times because of [climate change](#). Even as officials eased up on the regulations, the state made permanent prohibitions against washing down sidewalks and driveways, using a hose without a shut-off valve to wash cars and banning the use of water on road medians.

Still, officials said that conditions had improved enough that the drastic measures that Mr. Brown announced were no longer needed.

“We are still in a drought, but we are no longer in the-worst-snow-pack-in-500-years drought,” said Felicia Marcus, the head of the state water board. “We had thought we are heading toward a cliff. We were worried we were in our own [Australian millennial drought](#). We wanted to make sure people didn’t keep pouring water on their lawns with wild abandon.”

Many of the 411 water agencies across the state, even as they complied with the mandatory cutback, had complained that the statewide requirement failed to take into account water supply conditions, which vary widely from region to region. And some, such as in Beverly Hills, with its estates surrounded by sweeps of lawns and gardens, resisted at first, but eventually complied.

Under the [new rules](#), which take effect on June 1, communities would set reduction guidelines based on their own projection of water supplies, assuming that the next three years here continue to be uncommonly dry. The state would review the projections and could impose restrictions on communities it determines were being unrealistic.

Max Gomberg, the climate and conservation manager for the board, said it would review the order again in January and could return to mandatory statewide reductions if communities revert to water-wasting habits or if next year were dry again. Some meteorologists are predicting a weather pattern next year known as La Niña, the opposite of an El Niño, meaning that rainfall levels are significantly below normal.

“If it’s looking like people have forgotten about the fact that there’s a drought, and gone back to wholesale water wasting, we’ll take that into consideration,” he said.

Tim Quinn, the executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, applauded the rollback, saying statewide restrictions failed to account for communities that had already taken steps to save water.

“This administration more than most listens, learns, adjusts and improves,” he said.

Jeff Kightlinger, the general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which supplies 19 million customers, called it a “reasonable and rational approach.”

“Water conditions at the end of the day are local,” he said. “People will still continue a strong push for conservation. It will be not quite as vociferous as it was.”

The confidence on display was in many ways tentative, and raised the prospect that officials could be sending mixed messages to a state that had largely fallen in line after Mr. Brown, standing last year on a barren field where snow was typically piled high, proclaimed the need for the state to adapt to more arid times.

The state has long struggled to find ways to get water in the north to the people in the south. The state’s [reservoir levels](#) reflect the geographical disparity of El Niño. The state’s two largest and most important reservoirs, Shasta Lake and Oroville Lake, are both above their historical averages for this time of year. But reservoirs farther south, like [New Melones Lake](#) and Castaic Lake, remain far below average.

“We saw some improvement,” said Michael Anderson, the state climatologist, of the period from October to April when 90 percent of California’s precipitation occurs. “But it was skewed north. There are definitely some regions that will still have a tough time, because the rainfall missed them.”

The snowpack this year was close to historical levels. But warm weather has melted a lot of it away, and it has now dwindled to 33 percent of the historical average. Mr. Anderson said that is a result of climate change.

“The snowpack is fading quickly,” Mr. Anderson said. “One of the challenges has been the really warm temperatures. Our expectations are that those will continue to become an increasing challenge in the decades ahead.”

The tepid El Niño undercut the almost universal predictions of meteorologists here that had sent people out buying flood insurance and communities stockpiling sand bags. “We’re still waiting for the science community to diagnose why this particular El Niño didn’t go according to script,” Mr. Anderson said.

Ms. Marcus said that El Niño, while not saving the state, “gave us something of a reprieve.” She said the board was correct in acting so aggressively last year and that it could very well end up doing so again.

“We felt we really had to press the emergency brake in case we were going to have a series of multiple dry years,” she said. “We’ve gotten a great down payment on the future of dealing with climate change and what’s coming at us.”

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