

Commercial Property Owners Face Water Restrictions as California's Drought Deepens Water Conservation Rules Vary but Generally Limit Outdoor Use

By Jack Witthaus

Some Southern California commercial property owners will be limited in their water usage this summer as statewide calls grow for water conservation in response to an extended drought.

Water utilities in recent days initiated strict restrictions for both commercial and residential property owners after years of below-average rainfall. For now, many places in Southern California allow for some outdoor watering of gardens and lawns, but if the drought persists, a complete outdoor water ban may be enacted.

The State Water Resources Control Board on May 24 called for banning irrigating turf at commercial, industrial and institutional properties, including grass in front of or next to large industrial and commercial buildings starting June 10, according to a statement. Violations may result in fines.

There typically isn't a lot of outdoor space to be watered at commercial properties in Southern California, and most open space around apartment buildings has already been converted to drought-tolerant landscaping in response to frequent periods of water restrictions, said Kitty Wallace, senior executive vice president at Colliers.

"Land is scarce, housing is in need and you're going to build the largest density housing that you can," she said.

Still, it's challenging for apartment landlords to enact water restrictions on tenants, Wallace said. In California, landlords often are responsible for paying the water bill each month, while tenants are not individually metered. Landlords that pay water bills usually are restricted to sending notes to tenants asking them to reduce their water usage.

The drought led Gov. Gavin Newsom to call on Southern Californians to curtail water usage by 20% to 30%. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the biggest Southern California utility, asked customers to limit outdoor watering to two days a week before 9 a.m. or after 4 p.m., according to a June 1 statement. Previously, watering was allowed only three days per week.

Securing water has been key to Southern California's growth, and many of the cities rely on water from outside the region. Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest city, gets most of its water from the Owens River, Northern California and the Colorado River, according to the University of Southern California.

Despite serving a population of around 10 million people, all the water flowing into Los Angeles

County remains a drop in the bucket when it comes to the state's consumption. Roughly 80% of water in California is consumed by its vast agriculture industry, according to the state's website.

Indeed, Californians have become more economical in their water usage over the years as the state has grown. The state's population doubled between 1967 and 2016, but water use only increased 13%, according to an April 2022 Pacific Institute study.