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Sonoma, Mendocino counties face water cuts

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Sonoma County officials have won state permission to immediately cut water flows in the Russian River, but in return they must work to reduce water use in the next six months by 25 percent in Sonoma County and 50 percent in Mendocino County.

The Sonoma County Water Agency on Tuesday cut releases to the river from a much-diminished Lake Mendocino near Ukiah. The action came hours after it received permission from the state Water Resources Control Board late Monday.

But the same order that allows more water to be stored for use this fall also requires strict cuts in water use. Included is a specific prohibition on businesses irrigating lawns between May 1 and Oct. 2 within the water agency's service area, which extends from Windsor to Petaluma.

"It certainly is going to impact a lot of landscaping in this county," said Windsor Town Manager Matt Mullan.

The water agency is seeking clarification on the prohibition on commercial irrigation. Officials want to know whether the rule extends to city parks, golf courses and municipal buildings, as well as to businesses that use well water or recycled water, agency spokesman Brad Sherwood said.



KENT PORTER / PD

The Sonoma County Water Agency on Tuesday cut releases to the river from a much-diminished Lake Mendocino near Ukiah.

Despite this week's showers, the region is still suffering through a season of too little rain and too little water stored in Lake Mendocino.

County officials said that if the state had turned down their request to cut flows now, the lake might have had too little water this fall to release for threatened chinook salmon as they return to spawn.

"Our lake level today is what it normally looks like in August," said Richard Shoemaker, a Ukiah resident and board member for the Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District.

Shoemaker, a former Mendocino County supervisor, said a 50 percent cut in water use would be "a huge hit" for residents there, resulting in "some pretty brown-looking lawns and fields and golf courses." But without such conservation, he said, "we're in a position to be out of water before the end of summer here."

The state order and the dry conditions will affect farmers and tourism businesses along the river, as well as residents from Ukiah to San Rafael.

"It's a call for all water users in Sonoma County to conserve their water use," said Paul Kelley, chairman of the Board of Supervisors and head of the water agency.

The agency, which serves about 600,000 residents, now must cut its own river diversions by 25 percent from Monday when the order was signed through Oct. 2. It also must come up with a conservation plan for that period involving farmers and water districts in both counties. That plan must include the goal of a 25 percent cut for Sonoma and 50 percent cut for Mendocino.

Under the order, the water agency has permission to cut the river's summertime flows to levels not seen since the drought of 1977 — a meager 25 cubic feet per second above Dry Creek near Healdsburg and 35 cubic feet per second on the lower river.

This week's special order was needed because under the state's normal criteria, the conditions weren't deemed dry enough to allow reduced flows to the river.

What remained unclear Tuesday was whether the state order would result in mandatory conservation measures in Santa Rosa and other cities.

Santa Rosa has plans that call for mandatory conservation when water use must be cut by 25 percent. But various officials said Tuesday they still need more information on the way the state will measure the cut. Some said they also want

to know what specific allocation they will receive from the water agency.

“We don’t know how much water we will get,” said Jennifer Burke, a senior water resources planner for the city of Santa Rosa.

Mullan, Windsor’s town manager, said his town probably would ask residents for voluntary cuts to achieve a 25 percent reduction. Even so, cutting outdoor water use will offer the biggest potential savings.

“If the last time you walked on your lawn was when you mowed it,” Mullen said, “maybe you should consider something else.”

Jake Mackenzie, a Rohnert Park councilman and chairman of the county water agency’s Water Advisory Committee, said the various city representatives likely will gather early next month to discuss the state order, the amount of available water and the plan for conservation.

Making it through the summer will require the help of water users throughout the river’s reach, he said.

“What we all understand is we all have a problem with water levels in Lake Mendocino,” Mackenzie said.

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