

California Drought: What Can Your HOA Do to Save Water?

Dry California riverbed caused by the droughtHave you ever brushed your teeth and left the faucet running while you stand there scrubbing away? Or taken a stroll through your neighborhood and noticed that the sprinklers watered the sidewalk more than the grass? Water conservation is a hot topic in California right now, and it's becoming more and more urgent for HOAs to find ways to save water in their community.

Is the Drought Draining HOAs Dry?

Governor Brown declared a statewide drought on January 17, 2014, asking all Californians to conserve water in every way possible. Almost daily we're reminded of the severity of this drought with stories of disappearing reservoirs and cities rationing their residents' water consumption. With California enduring one of the most severe droughts in recorded state history, your HOA may be asking itself, what can my community do to help?

Ever since 2009, HOAs have been called to action by California legislation to promote water conservation efforts in their community. Just last year, two completely separate laws were signed by the Governor to prohibit fining against HOA members for reducing landscape watering. This is because community associations are in a unique position to have an enormous impact on water conservation.

In some areas, 50% or more of the water we use daily is used on lawns and outdoor landscaping. We've all seen the early morning cycle where the runoff makes the concrete look wetter than the grass, or found those pesky sprinkler heads that have been turned away from the intended landscape. However, large-scale landscape renovation can be expensive, and if your association is not already budgeting for this, the financial impact to the membership could be startling.

In this article, we discuss cheap, efficient ways for your HOA to start conserving water today, as well as offer some long-term solutions that your HOA may want to invest in.

Five Easy Ways to Conserve Water in Your Community

We've put together a list of five affordable methods to conserve water in your association. We believe that everyone should follow these steps, whether you're an individual maintaining your front yard or an HOA managing the landscape around the pool (or any other common areas). For

board members and managers, we recommend sending this list to your HOA membership in your next newsletter, so your whole community can make an impact on the environment.

Water Less Often

According to the EPA ([link is external](#)), about 50% of water used on lawns and landscaping is wasted as run-off or evaporation. To help control water waste, water manually for as long as possible, at least into the early summer. Try only watering once every two weeks during this time to further reduce water use.

When the lawn starts showing signs of stress (i.e. browning, dry spots, etc.), it's time to turn the irrigation system back on automatic. Start off small at just one day a week, and continue until you notice the lawn stressing again. Add another day (so you're watering twice a week), and keep this up for as long as your lawn will allow before adding a third day. Try to avoid adding more than three days altogether. In fact, some cities have a limit on how many days homeowners can water, so make sure your HOA stays within legal limits.

Treat Shrubs Differently from Lawns

Not all plants were created equally and should therefore be managed differently. Watering your shrubbery at the same time and for the same duration as your lawn can lead to water waste in two ways:

Shrubs consume water much slower than turf grass

Shrub roots go much deeper than grass, giving them a much larger water reservoir

If you water shrubs the same way you water grass, the excess water will sit on top of the soil and evaporate before the shrub is able to consume it. To reduce water waste, water shrubs manually at least until summer. In many cases it's even possible to water established shrubs manually year round, since many breeds of shrubbery only need three to four deep irrigations per season in California's climate.

Embrace Mulch in Landscaping

Mulch retains roughly twice as much moisture ([link is external](#)) than your average garden dirt.

Apply three inches of mulch to all shrub beds and around tree bases; reapply every year. This practice will not only reduce water use but is great for improving soil and plant health. Over time water will infiltrate deeper into the soil making plants more resilient to drought.

Check for Leaks

Routinely turn on the irrigation system and check for breaks and leaks. If you see any problems, fix them as soon as you can to minimize water leakage. This should be part of every landscape maintenance practice and contract.

Adjust your sprinklers

While this may seem obvious, ideally you want your sprinklers to only water the intended area. This means that you want your sprinklers to avoid hitting asphalt or sidewalk (or any hard surface) as well as hitting a planting area that has a separate watering zone.

It's also good practice to make sure your sprinklers are set at an optimal water pressure. When the water pressure is too high, the water droplets are incredibly small creating a misty effect. This causes up to 20 percent of the water to disperse in the air (especially if it's windy!) and evaporate.

Long-Term Water Saving Investments

It's common to think of a drought as a rare or infrequent occurrence. And yet for the last eighty years of California climate, only about one-third has been wet years, with a majority being either dry or critically dry (aka drought). Maybe it's time we re-envisioned the landscape and planned for the future. We should ask ourselves the tough question: Why do we go back to pre-drought bad water habits when the rains return?

What if instead we incorporated water conservation practices into our daily routines and maintenance contracts? What if we budget and invest in irrigation upgrades for the long term in order to make the landscape more resilient to future droughts? We'll discuss three ways to reduce overall water usage in the long-run, which can save your HOA money and help our California environment at the same time.

Replace the Lawn with a Sustainable Landscape

Sustainable landscaping Sustainable landscaping is an upgrade, not a compromise.

While green lawns may look pretty, turf uses more water and covers more area than all the other plants combined. One of the best ways to save water is to replace high-water using plants with low-water using plants. For most people, converting to a sustainable landscape is an upgrade not a compromise, and they quickly learn to love the new look. Once people see well-designed examples of sustainable landscapes, they understand that they don't have to be dull, dry-looking, and prickly. With good design, sustainable landscapes use considerably less water, fertilizer, and pesticides all while requiring less time and money to maintain. Before replacing your lawn, consider conducting a walkthrough on your landscaping to find out what options are best for your property.

Calculate Your Water Budget

Calculating your water budget means determining how much water your landscape requires to thrive. Often times, homeowners will find that their irrigation system is inefficient, applying much more water than your plants actually need. Adjusting your irrigation system to stick to your water budget is one of the most important changes you can make to water more efficiently, minimize waste, and save money.

To calculate your water budget, you'll need to know your irrigated landscape area pretty well, including the percentage of turf and shrubs. You'll also need to know your zip code. Then, use the EPA's water budget tool ([link is external](#)) to determine how much water your landscape needs.

Once you have a budget, all you have to do is read your water meter once a week, input the meter readings into a spreadsheet and compare it to the water budget. If you're over budget, adjust the irrigation timer down until your consumption matches the budget or is less.

When trying to meet your water budget, keep these two tips in mind:

Sprinklers should apply water evenly within each irrigation zone.

Water must be absorbed by the soil to effectively water plants, meaning it should be applied slowly to allow it to soak in.

You may want to consider installing smart controller and other technologically advanced irrigation systems. While not necessary, these tools can help you water efficiently and easily, and may be worth the investment. Read this article for a detailed look at irrigation technology and options.

Choose High Quality Water Management Professionals

Water management is a valuable skill which should be specifically included in maintenance contracts. The cost of water is increasing faster than inflation and good property managers will serve their clients best by looking into landscape upgrades that will make their landscapes more resilient to future droughts.

Urban water agencies are starting to envision what more resilient landscapes might look like, causing more and more of these new landscapes to pop up in neighborhoods and HOAs throughout California.

Start Saving Water Today!

The first step to saving water is being aware of the everyday water waste going on in both your home and your community. There are many websites that offer information on conservation and even water use calculators (link is external) that can help you gain an understanding of your current water use. There are also Return on Investment (ROI) calculator (link is external)s that can show you how long it will take for the savings from your modifications to offset the expenses for making these changes.

If making these changes seems time-consuming and stressful, try asking your landscapers how much water your landscaping really needs in order to thrive. If you are on a well, ask your maintenance experts to give you an idea of the current level of the natural aquifers you are pulling resources from. Many will recommend annual inspections to ensure the maximization of pressure and the continued availability of this natural (and still limited) supply.

Make the decision to conserve water on a daily basis, and most importantly, stay educated. Try educating your fellow neighbors or your HOA membership. You may be surprised at how many others in your community want to contribute. Spread the word through the use of community websites and newsletters and share ideas and links to resources in your community. Ask for ideas from other members in your association. Together, we can make a positive impact on conserving this precious natural resource.

Information provided by the East Bay Municipal Utility District and Jeffrey S. Farnsworth, CCAM, an ECHO North Bay Resource Panel participant.