

# WATER

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cent reduction, but the advisory panel unanimously urged skipping that step.

Andy Schiffrin, outgoing commission chairman, said he supported speeding up the timeline because of "the seriousness of the water situation, the uncertainty about whether it's going to get better or not, and the amount of time it will take to enforce Stage 3."

Water Director Rosemary Menard said it was ultimately the right call.

"It sends a really clear signal to the community what we are asking them to do and what they can expect," she said. "If the situation stabilizes and doesn't get any drier, we will have a 20-25 percent goal in place for a while. If conditions get worse and we don't have any more rain, this is the beginning of further cuts."

In another sign of the times, the city decided Tuesday the Loch Lomond Recreational Area, which typically reopens March 1 after a winter closure, will remain shuttered. The city's largest water storage facility is just 65 percent full with Newell Creek, which drains into the 175-acre reservoir, suffering from "historically low levels," the city reported.

Exposed tree stumps decorate the reservoir's steep banks and could be hazardous to recreational users and

rental boats, the city warned. The drought, characteristic of a historic statewide dry spell, has increased the threat of wildfire around the lake and the marina won't be able to function if the water level falls an additional 6 feet.

The city has been drawing more from Loch Lomond than in previous dry years because of a reduction in diversions from North Coast streams as part of fish habitat conservation negotiations with state and federal regulators. Officials said a final proposal is expected by fall.

## WHY RATIONING?

Santa Cruz last declared a Stage 3 alert in 1990 and before that in 1977. A measure of monthly stream flows in the San Lorenzo River, the city's largest water source, was lower in October through January than during

## AT A GLANCE

### STAGE 3 WATER REDUCTIONS

Under a Stage 3 Water Emergency, the Santa Cruz Water Department will reduce the delivery of water to customers based on their category. Here's how much water the categories will get compared to typical peak season demand:

**SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL:** 73 percent

**MULTIFAMILY RESIDENTIAL:** 78 percent

**BUSINESSES:** 92 percent

**UC SANTA CRUZ:** 76 percent

**OTHER INDUSTRIAL:** 72 percent

**MUNICIPAL:** 57 percent

**IRRIGATION:** 34 percent

**GOLF COURSE IRRIGATION:** 51 percent

SOURCE: Santa Cruz Water Shortage Contingency Plan, March 2009

those same periods in 1977, the city reported Monday.

Typical rainfall at this point in the season is nearly 16.5 inches. Yet Santa Cruz has received just 1.3 inches, with none in January, which is usually the wettest month.

Because rationing leads to selling less water, the Water Department will adjust its budget to cover fixed infrastructure and operating costs, as well as increased expenses. The department can hire additional temporary staff to manage conservation, customer service and enforcement efforts.

Menard said there are sufficient funds to block short-term rate increases for customers who abide by consumption budgets and a \$2.4 million stabilization fund set aside to further reduce rate impacts. With action from the council, she said,

the department also could re-direct funds earmarked for a stalled seawater desalination proposal or other programs.

Menard said she hopes by May to finalize penalty rates for exceeding water-use budgets, which are based primarily on whether customers are from single-family households, multifamily dwellings, businesses or other categories. City code allows for charging \$25 per unit of water that exceeds allotments by up to 10 percent and \$50 for each unit higher than 10 percent greater than the allotment.

Charlie Keutmann, co-owner of The Garden Company, isn't anticipating steep cuts in water delivery because his Mission Street business does not provide landscape irrigation. Still, the drought automatically changes the marketplace for plants and therefore the water use at the nursery.

"As people rightfully get concerned about household water consumption and landscape irrigation, there is a tendency to buy plants that require less water," he said. "They, too, require less water for us. There may be a reduction in business, but our inventory also would be reduced."

Keutmann said the Stage 3 alert is sensible.

"Why wait until things are absolutely dire to act?" he said.

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