

Watch that water

By Nick Green, Staff Writer

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Permanent limits on use of sprinklers are part of the new Torrance water-conservation policy, which the city imposed on Tuesday.

Do you expect a cool glass of ice water automatically placed in front of you when you eat at a Torrance restaurant?

Not any more.

Do you routinely rinse down your dusty Torrance driveway with a hose every now and then?

Forget about doing that anymore.

And do you let a hose gush while washing your car in your Torrance driveway?

That, too, is no longer permitted.

The Torrance City Council late Tuesday unanimously enacted a sweeping measure intended to fundamentally and permanently change how residents of the South Bay's largest city consume water.

The dozen prohibitions range from the arcane - such as requiring all fountains or decorative water features to use recirculated water - to the everyday: banning all watering of gardens or lawns from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, for instance.

Most restrictions take effect immediately and apply to all city residents, including those served by the private California Water Service Co.

"We are facing some drought conditions now, so that is one reason we're looking at it now," said Public Works Director Rob Beste. "But the key to this is, it's a permanent water-conservation requirement, not just in times of drought.

"Living in the semi-arid region that we do, it's promoting responsible water usage for all of us," he added. "Water supplies in California are always going to be limited and this will help ensure we have a sustainable future."

Torrance is just the latest South Bay city to update its water ordinance.

Rolling Hills Estates and Lomita enacted similar measures in February, while an updated ordinance is likely to come before the El Segundo City Council in April. An ordinance is also in progress in Manhattan Beach.

The ordinances are loosely based on one circulated by water wholesaler West Basin Municipal Water District, which serves 17 cities from Malibu to the South Bay.

The agency held a workshop for city officials and urged them to adopt a version.

"We think these ordinances are as much educational as anything else and they will help us meet the governor's goal of a 20 percent reduction (in water use) by 2020," said district spokesman Ron Wildermuth. "Torrance and these other cities are really being proactive."

Educational they may be, but Torrance's ordinance also has teeth. A first violation results in a written warning and copy of the ordinance thudding into your mailbox. Residents who violate the ordinance five times could find themselves fined up to \$500 and have their water service restricted or terminated.

In the most extreme cases, a person could be charged with a misdemeanor, which could mean a stay of up to 30 days in county jail and a fine of up to \$1,000.

However, Beste stressed those are considered last-ditch remedies.

"Long Beach has had their ordinance in effect for about a year and a half and they've had 5,000 reports of water wasting and, of those, they've only given out about 10 citations," he said. "Really the intent of this is education, trying to get people to change their water usage - not to fine people. We're not going to have water cops patrolling the city."

Torrance's advisory Water Commission began studying the issue last July and forwarded it to the City Council recommending adoption.

It's the first change in the city's water ordinance since one was adopted in 1991, in the midst of the previous severe drought that gripped the state.

But this one goes further, putting in place three stages of water conservation the city can declare when a water supply shortage exists.

Those stages call for reductions in water usage of 15 percent, up to 30 percent and more than 30 percent respectively.

If what's called a Level 3 Water Supply Condition is declared by the City Council, for instance, all irrigation using potable water is banned.

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Effective immediately Torrance residents may no longer:

Irrigate gardens between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. daily unless a "hand-held bucket" is used or hose with a shut-off nozzle.

Irrigate for longer than 15 minutes per day, unless "very low-flow drip type irrigation systems" are used.

Wash down "hard or paved surfaces" unless "safety or sanitary hazards" exist, and even then a bucket or hose with a nozzle must be used.

Allow "excessive water flow" from sprinkler systems into the street.

Ignore "leaks, breaks or malfunctions" in plumbing and irrigation systems.

Wash vehicles unless a bucket or hose with a nozzle is used.

Receive water in restaurants without expressly requesting it.

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