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# The drought eased up, and these Californians turned on the spigot

By MATT STEVENS AND RYAN MENEZES  
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Folsom Lake returned to a more robust level this year, one factor that may have prompted residents in nearby water districts to conserve less. (Los Angeles Times)

**T**he San Juan Water District showed the rest of California how to save water when the state needed the savings most.

The supplier for eastern Sacramento and southern Placer counties cut consumption 41% from 2013 levels during the summer of 2015 — the height of a years-long drought.

District residents let their acre-sized properties fade, livestock went thirsty, vineyards decayed.

Then, the rain arrived. Regulators relaxed the rules and on went some spigots.

This summer, the district used almost 600 million more gallons than it did last summer. Lacking a state mandate to conserve, residents' daily consumption climbed to more than 500 gallons per person.

The San Juan Water District's especially steep backslide stood out as part of a statewide trend: With mandatory state restrictions lifted, the overwhelming

majority of local suppliers saved less this summer, according to a Times analysis of state water data.

Regulators say San Juan — which this summer cut water use 12.8% from 2013 levels — is one of the suppliers they are scrutinizing and could reprimand as the prospect of a dry winter looms.

“Do these water managers understand how precarious our statewide situation still is, and are they acting responsibly?” said Max Gomberg, climate and conservation manager at the State Water Resources Control Board. “A relaxation of

[conservation requirements] is reasonable and appropriate; an abandonment of rules that help customers conserve is shortsighted and irresponsible.”

“

## **Do these water managers understand how precarious our statewide situation still is?**

— Max Gomberg, state climate and conservation manager

In interviews, officials with some water districts where water use has jumped the most cited faulty data, while others said regulators weren't giving them appropriate credit for their unique circumstances.

But some also acknowledged that they were eager to ease up on their customers after the state board lifted mandatory conservation for the vast majority of urban suppliers.

Lisa Brown, the San Juan Water District's customer service manager, said she and her colleagues could not ask people to save at high levels indefinitely, especially after they saw their local reservoir fill, and eventually spill.

As Brown sees it, 12.8% savings may be less than 41%, but it's far better than the zero percent the state now requires of her district.

“The mandatory restrictions were eliminated. Our customers did exactly what they were supposed to do,” Brown said. The district has asked residents to cut back 10% voluntarily.

Concerned by a statewide decline in water conservation, regulators cranked up their rhetoric at an early-October meeting.

They announced that statewide water conservation flagged in August for the third consecutive month, and their data showed that Californians had saved far less water this last summer compared with summer 2015. Water board Chairwoman Felicia Marcus said the state should be on “yellow alert.”

**The Times analysis uses two metrics that regulators say they are monitoring: drop-offs in conservation and high residential per-capita water use.**

The amount of water an urban supplier saved during summer 2015 was compared with the savings in June, July and August of this year. Adjustments were made to give greater weight to districts with atypically heavy residential per-capita water use.

Statewide, water conservation slid about nine percentage points, according to the analysis. About 93% of local suppliers saved less this summer than they did during the summer of 2015. Water districts in inland Northern California regressed the most. Three of the water districts where consumption rebounded at the highest rate draw supply from Folsom Lake.

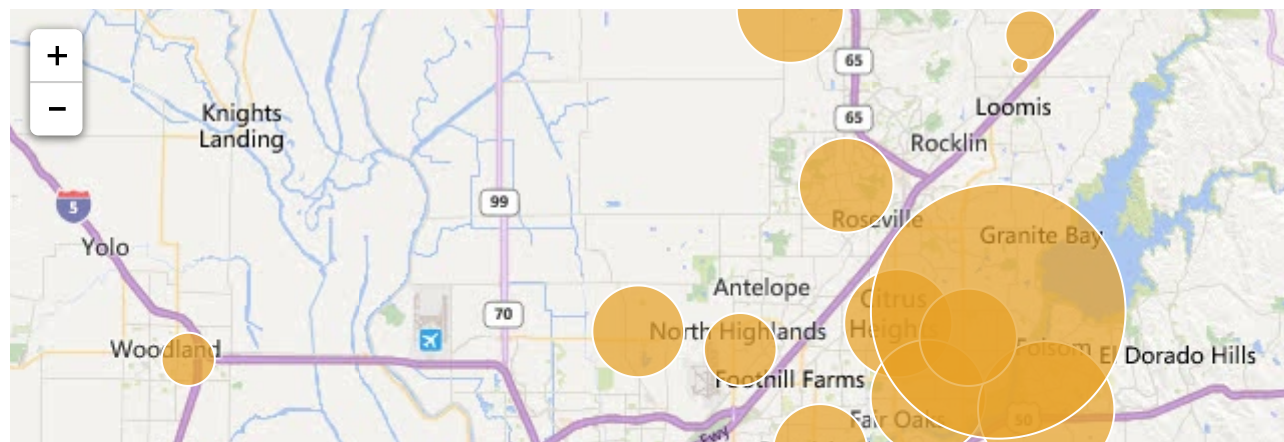
## Californians open the spigots

Most of the state’s local water suppliers ramped up consumption this summer after the state eased restrictions. Districts in inland Northern California regressed the most.

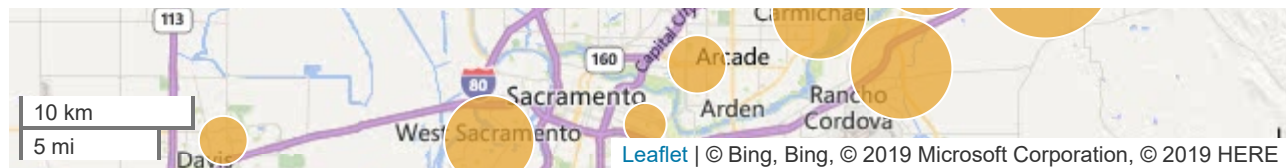
**Size of dots correlates with degree of conservation backslide (click map for details)**

Used more water

Saved more water







Sources: State Water Resources Control Board, Mapbox, OpenStreetMap. Data analysis by Ryan Menezes. Thomas Suh Lauder / @latimesgraphics

When customers saw that Folsom was spilling this spring, they expressed “significant anger” toward district staff members who urged them to keep conserving, Brown said.

Under pressure from districts such as San Juan, state water board members eventually ended mandatory conservation for providers that could prove they have a reliable three-year supply. The regulators argued that California’s improved hydrology allowed them to provide districts some relief. The changes took effect in June.

The Times analysis found that similar levels of backsliding occurred regardless of whether suppliers still were required to conserve by the state. Those without a state mandate saw water consumption rebound about 8.9 percentage points this summer. The smaller group of suppliers that are still under state orders to conserve saw water consumption increase slightly less — about 7.7 percentage points.

(Conservation efforts dropped off in Los Angeles, but only slightly, the analysis shows. The Department of Water and Power saved 18% during the summer of 2015 and continued to save 14% this summer, despite being told the district no longer was required to conserve. Angelenos used about 81 gallons of water per day in June, July and August.)

As California’s drought conditions improved and members of the state board mulled changing its rules, many of the districts did away with their excessive-use surcharges, allowed residents to resume watering their lawns more days per week and returned to voluntary conservation.

Brown said it was “absolutely unfair” to compare 2016 savings with 2015 savings, especially because the district had conserved so much during the drought’s most punishing period. Water managers in other districts where water savings have

punishing period. Water managers in other districts where water savings have declined made similar arguments.

Brown attributed San Juan's high per-capita use to its demographics and relatively low density.

"You have to consider what we look like here," Brown said, adding that livestock, orchards and vineyards require water to maintain. "We do not have postage-stamp-sized lots."

"Most people just want to salvage what they had, and to save 36% [as required by the state in 2015], they really had to sacrifice a lot," Brown continued. "[Customers are] really trying to reestablish existing landscapes, trying to revive trees and shrubs, revive what they have back."

“

**Most people just want to salvage what they had.**

— Lisa Brown, San Juan Water District customer service manager

Tracy Quinn, a policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, acknowledged that it can be difficult to assess appropriate water use in areas with large lots. A property owner who appears to be using a lot of water might be using it efficiently if the property's outdoor area is extremely large, she said.

"But in a drought emergency, it seems a bit egregious to be using nearly 500 gallons of water per person per day," Quinn said. "They have the capacity to cut back."

Quinn said she is worried state officials will report an even larger backslide Tuesday when they are expected to release water-use data for September.

But Quinn said she is also concerned about what lies down the road.

The executive order that governs the current drought rules will expire in February. So the water board soon will need to grapple with whether to extend the emergency regulations and then potentially decide how to adjust them.

The decision to reinstate mandatory statewide water conservation is mostly a question of weather. The drier this winter proves to be, the more likely water districts will be told to ramp up their efforts again. Quinn said getting them to do so could prove difficult.

But one thing is almost certain.

“The only way for [the executive order] to expire is for us to determine that there is no longer a drought emergency,” Gomberg said, “and the likelihood of that is close to zero.”

## The 10 worst backsliders in California

The Times analyzed state water data to create a Conservation-Consumption Score that ranked suppliers on changes in overall water savings and per-person residential water use. [Search the full list >>](#)

Supplier	Conservation-Consumption Score
San Juan Water District	6.37
North Marin Water District	4.89
Santa Fe Irrigation District	4.82
Bella Vista Water District	3.71
City of Folsom	3.41
Valley Water Company	3.13
San Lorenzo Valley Water District	2.97
Fair Oaks Water District	2.88
Vaughn Water Company	2.87
Yucaipa Valley Water District	2.82

## How we did it

A Times analysis found that the overwhelming majority of California water districts increased their usage after the state eased its drought restrictions. Some of the most extreme increases were found in inland Northern California, led by the

the most extreme increases were found in inland Northern California, led by the San Juan Water District near Folsom Lake.

How did The Times come to that conclusion?

We started by downloading data from California's [State Water Resources Control Board](#), which publishes a monthly accounting of each district's water usage on its website. *prev info*

That data has been used by state regulators to monitor and enforce mandatory water-use reductions introduced as part of the state's emergency drought response.

Regulators ended mandatory conservation for the vast majority of urban water suppliers this spring.

The state measures each district's water savings by comparing the number of gallons it supplies to homes, businesses and institutions each month versus the same month in 2013, a baseline that precedes Gov. Jerry Brown's proclamation of a drought state of emergency.

The Times calculated that statistic for three months this summer after restrictions were eased, then compared it against the same months in 2015. In total, 93% of 387 districts increased water usage this summer. Nineteen districts were excluded because they did not report enough data to the state.

California's water districts vary greatly in size, from large urban areas like Los Angeles to small districts in the rural north. To compare suppliers and identify areas where residents use large amounts of water at home, state officials also track the total amount of water used by each district's average resident each day.

The Times combined that measure with each district's change in total summer water usage to create a ranking we're calling a Conservation-Consumption Score. By including both factors, this statistic better identifies areas where residents account for increases.

To learn more about our analysis and review the computer code that compiled the ranking, visit [our open-source repository on GitHub](#).

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***Times staff writer Ben Welsh contributed to this report.***

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