Department of Water Resources

Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance: 2015 Revision

Governor Brown's Drought Executive Order of April 1, 2015 (EO B-29-15) directed DWR to update the State's Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance (Ordinance) through expedited regulation. The California Water Commission approved the revised Ordinance on July 15, 2015.

Which Projects are Subject to the Ordinance?

New development projects that include landscape areas of 500 sq. ft. or more are subject to the Ordinance. This applies to residential, commercial, industrial and institutional projects that require a permit, plan check or design review. The previous landscape size threshold for new development projects ranged from 2500 sq. ft. to 5000 sq. ft.

The size threshold for existing landscapes that are being rehabilitated has not changed, remaining at 2500 sq. ft. Only rehabilitated landscapes that are associated with a building or landscape permit, plan check, or design review are subject to the Ordinance.

When Does the Ordinance Go into Effect?

Local agencies (cities and counties) have until December 1, 2015 to adopt the Ordinance or adopt their own ordinance, which must be at least as effective in conserving water as the State's Ordinance. Local agencies working together to develop a regional ordinance have until February 1, 2016 to adopt, but they are still subject to the December 2015 reporting requirements (see *Reporting Requirements* below). If a local agency does not take action on a water efficient landscape ordinance by the specified dates, the State's Ordinance becomes effective by default.

What are the Significant Revisions?

More Efficient Irrigation Systems

- Dedicated landscape water meters or submeters are required for residential landscapes over 5000 sq. ft. and non-residential landscapes over 1000 sq. ft.
- Irrigation systems are required to have pressure regulators and master shut-off valves.
- All irrigation emission devices must meet the national standard stated in the Ordinance to ensure that only high efficiency sprinklers are installed.
- Flow sensors that detect and report high flow conditions due to broken pipes and/or popped sprinkler heads are required for landscape areas greater than 5000 sq. ft.
- The minimum width of areas that can be overhead irrigated was changed from 8 feet to 10 feet; areas less than 10 feet wide must be irrigated with subsurface drip or other technology that produces no over spray or runoff.

Incentives for Graywater Usage

Landscapes under 2500 sq. ft. that are irrigated entirely with graywater or captured rainwater are subject only to the irrigation system requirements of Appendix D, Prescriptive Compliance Option.

Improvements in Onsite Stormwater Capture

Friable soil is required in planted areas to maximize water retention and infiltration. Four yards of compost per 1000 sq. ft. of area must be incorporated. Other recommended measures for increasing onsite stormwater retention are listed in the Ordinance.

Limiting the Portion of Landscapes that can be Planted with High Water Use Plants

The maximum amount of water that can be applied to a landscape is reduced from 70% of the reference evapotranspiration (ETo) to 55% for residential landscape projects, and to 45% of ETo for non-residential projects. This water allowance reduces the landscape area that can be planted with high water use plants such as cool season turf. For residential projects, the coverage of high water use plants is reduced from 33% to 25% of the landscaped area. In non-residential landscapes, planting with high water use plants is not feasible. However, unchanged in the Ordinance is the extra water allowance made for non-residential areas when used for specific functional areas, such as recreation and edible gardens. Extra water allowance is also made for landscapes irrigated with recycled water, as was the case in the previous ordinance.

The irrigation efficiency of devices used to irrigate landscapes is one of the factors that goes into determining the maximum amount of water allowed. Rather than having one default irrigation efficiency for the entire site, the revised Ordinance allows the irrigation efficiency to be entered for each area of the landscape. The site-wide irrigation efficiency of the previous ordinance was 0.71; the revised Ordinance defines the irrigation efficiency of drip as 0.81 and that of overhead spray as 0.75.

Median strips cannot be landscaped with high water use plants, precluding the use of cool season turf. Also because of the requirement to irrigate areas less than ten feet wide with subsurface irrigation or other means that produces no runoff or overspray, the use of cool season turf in parkways is limited.

Reporting Requirements

All local agencies will report on the implementation and enforcement of their ordinances to DWR by December 31, 2015. Local agencies developing a regional ordinance will report on their adopted regional ordinance by March 1, 2016. Reporting for all agencies will be due by January 31st of each year thereafter.

Prescriptive Checklist Option for Landscapes under 2500 sq. ft.

Projects with landscape areas under 2500 sq. feet may comply with the performance requirements of the Ordinance or conform to the prescriptive measures contained in Appendix D. Many will find that the Appendix D checklist simplifies compliance.

How Much Water Will Be Saved?

DWR estimates that a typical California landscape will use 12,000 gallons less a year, or 20 percent less than allowed by the 2009 ordinance. Commercial landscapes will cut water use by 35%. Over the next three years, it is predicted that 472,000 new homes associated with 20,000 acres of landscape will be built in California. With proper implementation and enforcement by local agencies, the Ordinance will lead to substantial water savings.

How Can I Get Additional Assistance?

In Fall 2015, DWR will release a guidance document to accompany the Ordinance. Training workshops for local agency staff and landscape professionals will be held throughout the State.

Contact Information:

Julie Saare-Edmonds, DWR Senior Environmental Scientist at Julie.Saare-Edmonds@water.ca.gov or (916) 651-9676