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Spike in water demand predicted 40% more by 2030, according to study

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SACRAMENTO – California's thirst for water will jump by 40 percent during the next 25 years at current rates, with much of the water going for landscaping in the hot, dry inland valleys that will see the bulk of the population growth, warns a study being released today.

The nonpartisan, nonprofit Public Policy Institute of California plotted future use from current water consumption, population growth estimates and demographic projections. It predicted 14 million more people will each use 232 gallons each day by 2030. But the institute says conservation, water planning and recycling can help meet the demand as the West struggles with continuous water shortages.

The institute found that a 2001 state law is working well, requiring that housing developers demonstrate in advance that they have lined up enough water for new residents before they start building homes.

Yet one-sixth of large municipal water utilities failed to submit water plans when last required five years ago, and other plans lacked adequate supply and demand projections. A Senate-approved bill pending in the Assembly would increase reporting requirements.

California already has made strides in cutting indoor water use with more stringent plumbing codes and requiring water-efficient appliances.

Outside, however, a lot of water goes to keep suburban lawns green.

And with half of all the state's projected new residents moving to Sacramento, San Joaquin and western San Bernardino and Riverside counties, that use will increase dramatically. Half of all the water used by inland homeowners goes to irrigating yards, compared with one-third or less on the cooler coast.

Using water more efficiently is key to meeting the growing demand, said report author Ellen Hanak, an economist and a researcher at the institute.

"A lot of people put too much water on their lawns. There's a potential for cutting way back and still having a nice green lawn," she said.

Education helps, but new technology should actually monitor the weather and lawn needs and adjust accordingly, she said.

Also, California cities can follow the example of Las Vegas, promoting the use of native plants while maintaining much smaller lawns, Hanak said. New developments and golf courses, parks and roadway medians can be designed to use recycled water, as some cities are doing already, said Hanak and Yvonne Hunter, a legislative representative for the League of California Cities.

But there are no easy answers, warned Hunter.

"We need to build more housing," Hunter said. "As more and more housing is built to meet the state's population growth . . . we're stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place."

More water storage could help, including innovative ideas like storing water underground as well as in traditional reservoirs, said Hanak. And more exotic ideas, like desalination and cloud-seeding could play a role in some areas.

Regulatory hurdles for recycling and desalination projects should be lowered, said Jennifer Persike of the Association of California Water Agencies, and groundwater and surface water projects should move quickly.

"We think all of these things have to be done, not just cherry-picking," said Persike. "It's a total package."