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Parched California Moves to Boost Water-Saving Toilets and Faucets



By Rory Carroll Apr 22, 2014

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - With California facing its worst drought in a century, state officials have fast-tracked first-in-the-nation water efficiency standards for new toilets, urinals and faucets, an action expected to save about 8.2 billion gallons of water the first year while cutting energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.

The draft standards, released late last week, would prohibit the sale of appliances in California that do not meet proposed standards, which are expected to go into effect in 2016.

The standards would require that toilets use no more than 1.28 gallons per flush instead of the current limit of 1.6 gallons per flush.

They would limit urinals to a half a gallon of water per flush, half of what is currently allowed.

Lavatory faucets would have a maximum water use level of 1.5 gallons per minute under the proposed standards, down from the current limit of 2.2 gallons per minute.

California Energy Commission Chair Robert Weisenmiller hopes that California's standards will serve as a model for other parched states and even the federal government as policymakers grapple with how to conserve water as climate change puts a dent in supplies.

"Other states tend to follow our example," Weisenmiller told Reuters.

The standards are the latest effort by California to reduce water use through regulation. Before 1970, most toilets used 6 gallons per flush or more and some faucets as much as 7 gallons per minute.

California set its first limits on appliances in 1978, updating them in the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1992, Congress used California's standards as the basis for the first federal standards, which were implemented in 1994 and haven't been updated since.

"California is a testing ground for these kinds of policies," Weisenmiller said.

In addition to conserving water, the proposed standards would save 25 million therms of natural gas, a key source of energy to heat, treat and move water in the Golden State. Water accounts of about 20 percent of all electricity used in California. The standards would also slash the state's output of heat-trapping greenhouse gases by 202,000 tons its first year, according to the CEC.

Currently, appliances that meet proposed standards are available to the market, Weisenmiller said. Any additional cost for new, efficient ones will be more than offset through lower water and energy bills over the life of the appliance, he said.

While the appliance standards won't help relieve the state's dry conditions, where snowpack in April was found to be 68 percent below normal for this time of year, they will help it prepare for what climate scientists say will be a hot and dry future for the state.

"These standards will make us better positioned for the next drought," he said.

Jerry Desmond, an attorney with Plumbing Manufacturers International (PMI), a trade group representing plumbing products manufacturers, said his group is broadly supportive of the state's efforts and plan to participate at an upcoming May 6 workshop on the standards.

The draft proposal is currently open for public comment. The standards are expected to take effect on January 1, 2016.