



Stricter water policy is urged

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State regulators have renewed water rights for more than 500 cities, towns, and other water suppliers, adding some new use restrictions that encourage conservation. But environmental groups, which draw members from most area towns, say the rules do not go far enough to protect local waterways.

The renewals give the suppliers the right to continue drawing water from rivers, lakes, and ground-water basins.

Environmentalists fault the new policy for allowing water suppliers to pump as much water as they want during dry spells, up to the time a drought is officially declared. They urged the addition of "stream-flow triggers" that would require communities to impose outdoor watering bans earlier, when stream flows drop below set levels.

Duane LeVangie, state water-management policy director, said the state sought a "middle way" between the wishes of environmentalists and water suppliers, who opposed such restrictions. The new rules are sufficient protection for the area's waterways, he said.

The rules, issued Dec. 31, apply only to water suppliers that existed before the state Water Management Act was approved 20 years ago, and had not yet been brought under its provisions. (They are referred to as "registered" suppliers.)

Those suppliers will, for the first time, be required to work toward limiting their water supply to an average per-capita consumption of 65 gallons per day.

The new policy also requires communities to impose outdoor watering restrictions when the state declares a drought advisory.

But seven area watershed associations - which together represent more than four dozen towns - say state drought advisories come too late, and don't necessarily respond to local conditions. Regional habitats are under stress in



July and August when water levels fall and human water use increases, environmentalists said, but drought advisories are declared only following two months of low rainfall.

Stricter rules are needed to protect plants and animals earlier, so they don't suffer irreversible damage when watersheds are pumped dry, they say.

Environmentalists will try to influence policy making when an advisory body next meets with state water-management officials, possibly next month.

