

SACRAMENTO — Some Southern California water districts became so good at saving water and building their own water storage facilities in recent decades that residents are not feeling the effects of the worst drought to hit the state in a generation.

That's a problem.

Thinking plenty of water was available at the start of summer, residents along a coastal area doused their lawns and filled their pools, while elsewhere in the state farmers fallowed hundreds of thousands of acres.

The coastal region was cited along with the northeast corner of the state in a study released Tuesday as areas that saw significant increases in water use, even as Governor Jerry Brown called for Californians to cut use by 20 percent.

The same day, state regulators moved to jolt residents into saving water by authorizing fines up to \$500 for wasting water on lawns or letting hoses run while they are washing vehicles.

“They're basically reaching out and grabbing urban California by the lapels and saying you have to take this drought seriously,” Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, said Wednesday.

The urgency has grown after the report by the State Water Resources Control Board showed that overall statewide water consumption rose by 1 percent in May over previous years.

The increase was driven mainly by the heavily populated Southern California coastal communities that increased water use by 8 percent in May and the rural northeastern area of the state, where use jumped 5 percent.

Officials say those areas are not seeing the effects of the drought, partly because of efforts made by districts to conserve and build water storage in recent decades.

By contrast, communities that draw from the Sacramento River reduced consumption the most, by 13 percent, while those along the North Coast used 12 percent less. San Francisco Bay Area cities and Southern California cities that draw from the Colorado River decreased use by 5 percent.

Agriculture is by far the state's greatest water user, accounting for 75 percent of consumption. Cities and suburbs use about 20 percent of the state's water, with about half going outdoors.

Madelyn Glickfeld, director of the UCLA Water Resources Working Group, told state regulators that because Southern California water agencies have adequate current supplies and parks and street medians are still green, residents are not feeling the effects of the drought.

That disconnect was illustrated in January, when Brown urged Californians to take shorter showers, turn off faucets while brushing their teeth, and leave toilets unflushed.

The general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California responded then by saying the district had ample water storage that would allow it to avoid the mandatory residential water cutbacks that state regulators ordered on Tuesday.

“The fact is that urban California in particular is better prepared for this drought than it has been for any drought in its history,” said Quinn, the water agencies’ chief. “It has kind of shielded the water user. You don’t have water managers pushing panic buttons.”

While approving fines for residents, the state water board also sent a message to water districts: Agencies that don’t comply with rules involving water-wasters could face fines up to \$10,000 a day.

Water regulators and suppliers said they believe residents will respond when they realize the statewide drought is real.

The state posted a brief video Wednesday by Lady Gaga in which she urges conservation, part of a commitment she made after being allowed to shoot a music video at the historic Hearst Castle, in which she frolicked by the 345,000-gallon Neptune Pool.

While the water board debated mandatory cutbacks Tuesday, college student James Ho was playing on the mostly green lawn of an Arcadia park, 17 miles northeast of Los Angeles, along with 10 children he was supervising as part of an after-school day care program. Sprinklers sprayed a park bench and created a mud puddle under a bush.

Ho said he thinks the threat of a maximum \$500 fine is reasonable to spur more conservation. “To take it seriously, you have to have a bigger punishment,” he said.