Californians' barely cutting water use

By Fenit Nirappil, AP

SACRAMENTO — Californians conserved little water in March and local officials were not aggressive in cracking down on waste, state regulators reported Tuesday as they considered tough measures to force savings amid a continuing drought.

The State Water Resources Control Board received the update as it considers sweeping mandatory emergency regulations to protect water supplies in the parched state.

Brown has argued that the voluntary targets in place since early 2014 were insufficient and that Californians needed a jolt to take conservation seriously.

A survey of local water departments released at the start of the two-day meeting shows water use fell less than 4 percent in March compared with the same month in 2013. Overall savings have been only about 9 percent since last summer, even though Brown set a voluntary 20 percent target.

The water board on Tuesday began considering new regulations to step it up. The rules would bar cities from using drinking-quality water on street median grass and encourage homeowners to let lawns go brown to meet local mandatory water reduction targets.

Those conservation targets are among the most contentious provisions of the proposed rules. The board plans to order each city to cut water use by as much as 36 percent compared to 2013, the year before the governor declared a drought emergency, and has rejected calls to create easier targets for communities in drier areas or for cities that have been conserving since before the drought.

Some local water departments call the proposal unrealistic and unfair. They say achieving steep cuts could cause declining property values, restrictions on filling pools and washing cars and higher water bills.

An economic analysis of the water board's proposal commissioned by the board estimated that private water utilities and local water departments would lose a total of about $1 billion in revenue through lost water sales if they meet the board's targets. They will eventually charge higher rates to make up the revenue, the report said.

The board sees lush lawns and verdant landscapes as first on the chopping block to meet conservation targets, but some are fighting their depiction as villains in the drought.

Keith Harbeck, of the California Pool and Spa Association, told the board Tuesday that it is destructive to turn industries into symbols of water waste, including almond growers, water bottlers and golf courses.

"Finger-pointing has been particularly painful because folks pick whatever is symbolic," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the board. "It's a collective issue that we must all rise to."

Board officials said they expect to start seeing water savings as soon as June and are willing to add restrictions and penalties for agencies that lag.

Brown said last week he would push for legislation authorizing fines of up to $10,000 for extreme water wasters. Another tool, tiered pricing in which the price rises as water use goes up, is in question after a court struck down water rates designed to encourage conservation in San Juan Capistrano in Orange County.