STPUD encouraging residents to remove sod

By Kathryn Reed

More than 270,000-square-feet of grass have been eliminated in the six years since South Tahoe Public Utility District has had the turf buyback program. This equates to a savings of approximately 3.5 million gallons of water.

Last week the board agreed to put in $300,000 of district money into the program to be split between this season and next for residential customers and another $75,000 for businesses.

“We are committing our own resources to run the program irrespective of if the grant is approved,” General Manager Richard Solbrig told *Lake Tahoe News*.

To date the district has spent $400,000 on the program, with 95 percent of the money coming from grants. More grants have been applied for, but it’s not known yet if those dollars will be forthcoming.

The district is mandated by the state to reduce its water consumption by 28 percent. Turf buyback is a step toward meeting that requirement.



Jennifer Cressy with Tahoe Resource Conservation District explains various irrigation methods that don't use much water. Photo/LTN

The board on May 7 also agreed to keep the number of watering days to three, though that could change to two. The time to irrigate has been changed to between 6pm and 6am, with a maximum of 20 minutes per zone.

"The rebate program is an incentive to remove water intensive lawns with natural or adapted vegetation," Donielle Morse explained at a turf buyback meeting last week. Morse is in charge of the district's water conservation program.

She and Jennifer Cressy with Tahoe Resource Conservation District spent a couple hours telling about 20 people how the program works.

It is open to any STPUD water customer. It may be open to sewer customers if more money is available. About 200 households have participated going into this season.

It starts with getting your name on the list and then having Morse do a site visit. In years past the district insisted people have a living yard to be dug up. Because of the drought the district doesn't want people watering something that will be removed, so dead lawns can be part of the program.

“We don’t want you to water your lawn. You will quality even if the lawn is brown. If it’s dirt, you won’t qualify,” Morse explained.

Another requirement is that at least 400-square-feet of turf must be removed. Residents don’t have to take all of their grass out, though. And it cannot be relocated to another area of the yard.

While the district doesn’t say exactly how people must fill in what will be a bare area, there are some requirements. The plot must be covered with 35 percent living plants at maturity. This is down from past years when it was 50 percent.

“When you remove the lawn you need to revegetate,” Morse said. “There needs to be efficient irrigation.”

A new watering system is usually in the form of drip irrigation. Sprinkler heads can be capped or retrofitted to comply.

Final inspections require having names of the plants that were used and the water capacity of the irrigation system.

Any dirt areas must be covered with a permeable mulch or ground cover like thyme or strawberries. Artificial turf is not an option. Rock, bark and woodchips are good choices.

While the district won’t be looking at Tahoe Regional Planning Agency best management practice rules or defensible space regulations, those policies should be followed, Morse said.

Rebate checks are not issued until STPUD verifies the lawn is out, and the new plants and irrigation system are in place. The rebate is $1.50 per square foot of turf that is removed, with a maximum of 2,000 square feet being eligible or $3,000.

Because of the uncertainty of cash flow for the program, it’s possible some people won’t receive checks until 2016. This also means people have two summers to complete the program,

whereas previously it had to be done in one season.