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# Water wholesaler to fund in-the-red rebate program into coming fiscal year

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**By JANET ZIMMERMAN**
**The Press-Enterprise**

Southern California water managers agreed Tuesday to fund millions of dollars in pending rebate applications for low-flow toilets and other conservation devices and approved another $19 million to pay for the program for the coming fiscal year.

The vote by Metropolitan Water District's board of directors in Los Angeles was good news for several vendors who said they have laid off employees after waiting more than six months for payment.

MWD's "SoCal Water$mart" program ran out of money in June because rebate demand had tripled in the past year, exceeding the original $20 million budget by about $34 million. The rebates were available to customers of Southern California water agencies that buy supplies from MWD, including parts of western Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

"We're making changes in the program so that we don't have this situation happen again," said Randy Record, a board member representing Eastern Municipal Water District in Perris.

Those changes include lowering incentive amounts by half and maintaining an online rebate-reservation system that would alert customers to how much money is left in the program.

Rebate funding was in question last month for commercial vendors and for 20,000 residential customers who bought high-efficiency toilets, clothes washers, artificial turf, climate-sensitive irrigation controllers and special sprinkler heads. At the time, the program was thought to be $24 million in the red. But a board-ordered internal audit showed that valid pending claims for 2008-09 total $14.2 million.

Vendors who have installed water-saving devices for customers expecting rebates can expect payment within a month, said Debra Mann, MWD's assistant general manager and chief operating officer.

"We learned our lessons on how to move forward with this," she said.

The three-year, $75 million program will save 300,000 acre-feet of new supplies over the next 20 years, she said. One acre-foot equals almost 326,000 gallons, enough to supply two typical families for a year.

The board's action allows continued conservation rebates for customers of Western Municipal Water District, serving Corona, Norco, Moreno Valley, Murrieta, Lake Elsinore, Canyon Lake, Temecula and part of Riverside. Customers of Eastern, which serves Moreno Valley south to Temecula, and Inland Empire Utilities Agency in San Bernardino County, also are eligible.

"It's so important to say to the customers through incentives that they've got to change behavior in the way they use water. We're very grateful they continued the program," said John Rossi, Western's general manager.

MWD is aiming to save 1.1 million acre-feet per year of water -- equivalent to the demands of the cities of San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco -- by 2025. Before the rebate program, the agency failed to reach its annual goal; with the rebates it exceeded the annual goal by 80 percent, according to a staff report.

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**Rebates**

Information on Metropolitan Water District's conservation rebate program is available at socalwatersmart.com/.