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Water sense

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09:43 PM PDT on Tuesday, August 11, 2009

Property owners should not have to choose between following homeowners association rules and water conservation mandates. Homeowners associations, like all other Californians, need to adjust attitudes and rules to support more efficient water use.

The Karman family of Temecula, for example, illustrates the sometimes differing requirements of property associations and water agencies. The Karmans reduced the watering of their lawn, complying with restrictions imposed by the Rancho California Water District. Yet in June the family received a letter from the local homeowners association saying the lawn's brown spots violated association regulations.

The Karmans are not alone. Water districts routinely hear from residents frustrated with homeowners association rules that bar less water-intensive landscaping. About a third of Californians live in areas with homeowners associations, according to statistics cited by the Legislature.

There should be no conflict over water use, however. California faces threats to its water supply, and conservation is vital for the state's future. Homeowners association rules should reflect that need. And the Legislature is primed to intervene if associations fail to act. AB 1061, now in the Senate, would void any association rule that conflicts with conservation regulations.

Keeping neighborhoods in good condition helps preserve property values, but that goal should not override careful water use. Nor does it need to: Drought-resistant landscaping can save money and water, without harming property values. And the Rancho California district says its restrictions still allow sufficient irrigation to keep lawns healthy.

Preserving homes' appearance does not require sacrificing sensible water use. Lush, thirsty landscaping is a luxury California can no longer afford, whether or not the property is part of a homeowners association.