



## Preparing for California's New Rules on Nonfunctional Lawn

by Amy Talbot

**B**eginning January 1, 2029, homeowners associations (HOAs) across California will need to stop using potable (drinking) water to irrigate nonfunctional turf, as required under state law (AB-1572). Nonfunctional turf refers to irrigated lawn in common areas that is purely decorative and not regularly used for recreation or public gatherings.

While HOAs are not required to complete landscape conversions by 2029, potable irrigation must stop in these areas by that date. HOAs with more than 5,000 square feet of nonfunctional lawn will also need to self-certify compliance every three years beginning June 30, 2031.

### What Is Nonfunctional Lawn?

Nonfunctional lawn refers to an irrigated lawn that is purely decorative and not regularly used for recreation or public gatherings. Examples:

- Narrow strips along sidewalks, buildings, fences, or walls
- Decorative lawn near entry signs or community monuments
- Lawn in medians, roundabouts, or parking lot islands
- Lawn between buildings with no seating, access, or activity

- Sloped or oddly shaped lawn areas that are difficult to irrigate efficiently

By contrast, functional lawn (areas that serve a clear purpose) may continue to be irrigated with potable water. These areas include the following:

- Sports fields and playfields
- Picnic or gathering areas
- Lawns used for events or community activities
- Pet relief or pet play areas

## What Happens if HOAs Don't Comply?

Beginning in 2029, continuing to irrigate nonfunctional lawn with potable water can result in civil penalties of up to \$1,000 per day (California Water Code Section 1846). Enforcement practices may vary by water provider, so HOAs should check with their local water utility company for details.

Knowing these requirements early gives HOAs time to plan projects, set budgets, and evaluate opportunities to transition decorative lawn into water-wise areas that use native plants, protect trees, and support long-term landscape health.

## Opportunities for HOAs

Nonfunctional lawn often represents a substantial portion of water use in HOA common areas, especially where irrigation systems are older. Transitioning away from decorative lawn can support several goals:

- Reduced water usage and lower utility bills
- New or improved areas where residents can gather, relax, or enjoy outdoor activities
- Less mowing, edging, and fertilizer use
- More resilient landscapes supported by water-wise and native plants
- Improved tree health through more targeted irrigation
- More habitat for pollinators and wildlife

## Preparatory Steps for HOAs

The following steps serve as a helpful road map for HOAs as they identify nonfunctional lawn areas, plan improvements, and prepare for compliance with the new requirements:

- **Engage Residents Early:** Share information about the new law, what qualifies as nonfunctional lawn, and the HOA's general approach. Early communication helps residents understand why changes are happening and what to expect.
- **Identify Nonfunctional Lawn Areas:** Walk common areas to inventory decorative lawn, such as entryway lawns, narrow strips, lawn along sidewalks and fences, medians, and areas between buildings.
- **Make a Plan:** Work with qualified landscape professionals to develop designs that use water-wise and native plants, mulch, non-turf groundcovers, shade trees, and pathways or gathering areas. Consider a phased approach. Share concept plans or plant lists with residents as they become available.

- **Explore Funding Options:** Check with your local water provider about rebates for lawn replacement and irrigation upgrades. Some programs require preapproval.
- **Plant Water-Wise Landscapes:** Begin with high-use or high-visibility areas. Fall is often the best planting season for native and low-water plants.
- **Protect Trees:** Trees should continue to receive irrigation at the dripline even after lawn watering stops. Adjust irrigation zones, add drip where needed, and consult arborists for mature or sensitive trees.
- **Upgrade Irrigation Systems:** Convert sprinklers to drip irrigation or efficient nozzles, install weather-based sprinkler timers, and set up separate irrigation zones for trees.
- **Document Progress:** Track details such as the square footage of lawn removed or no longer irrigated, irrigation changes, water-use reductions, and tree protection measures. These records will support future self-certification.

## Looking Ahead

The transition away from irrigating nonfunctional lawn is a key milestone for HOA landscape management. Preparing now allows HOAs to align with the new requirements and support landscapes that meet both regulatory and community needs.

The California Water Efficiency Partnership (CalWEP) has developed a toolkit to help HOAs understand and prepare for the new requirements. It includes tools to help identify areas of nonfunctional lawn, case studies from HOAs that have already made the transition, and sample articles for communicating with residents. These materials are available at [NonFunctionalTurfCA.org](http://NonFunctionalTurfCA.org).



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