

## **LEDE**

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Californians cut water use by 27 percent in August, marking the third consecutive month that residents and businesses surpassed the 25 percent conservation goal set by Gov. Jerry Brown to deal with the relentless drought, officials said Thursday.

The figures released by the State Water Resources Control Board showed a slight decrease in savings from the 31 percent posted for July — a development that raised concerns among some officials.

However, board chair Felicia Marcus said the slippage was not completely surprising given the heavy rains that drenched Southern California in July and prompted people to turn off sprinklers.

MIDDLETOWN, Calif. (AP) — California fire officials said Sunday a wildfire north of San Francisco destroyed another 162 homes, raising the number of homes destroyed to 1,050 and making it the fourth worst wildfire in the state's history.

The tally brought the total number of homes destroyed in two wildfires burning in Northern California the past two weeks to nearly 1,600, the [California Department](#) of Forestry and Fire Protection said.

Those fires killed five people, and on Sunday authorities announced that a body was found near the source of a new wildfire in Monterey County that destroyed or damaged 10 homes.

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Scientists are looking at ocean-warming trends to figure out why endangered Guadalupe fur seals are stranding themselves and dying in alarming numbers along the central California coast.

## **STORIES TO REWRITE**

Ten black women and a white woman kicked off the Napa Valley Wine Train in August have filed a racial discrimination lawsuit alleging the train's operators violated their civil rights,

libeled and defamed them, and subjected them to humiliating treatment simply because they were enjoying themselves.

The suit (embedded below) was filed in a San Francisco federal court by civil rights attorney Waukeen McCoy. The action names the wine train, its owners and three employees as defendants and seeks \$11 million in damages.

The company said in a statement issued by crisis public relations specialist Sam Singer that it takes allegations of discrimination very seriously and has hired a former FBI agent to investigate.

The plaintiffs, whose ages range from 36 to 85, are all members of a book club called Sistahs on the Reading Edge that had booked the Aug. 22 excursion in part to discuss recent reading and in part to celebrate a member's birthday.

The group's trip began in Napa but quickly soured, the lawsuit says, when a member of the train staff confronted them repeatedly and warned the women they were too loud. The complaint says that one white passenger told book group leader Lisa Renee Johnson, "This is not a bar." The group's trip ended prematurely in St. Helena, where the 11 women were marched past other passengers and handed over to police officers waiting at trackside.

The train company initially published a Facebook post accusing the group of "verbal and physical abuse toward other guests and staff." But the company removed the post as Johnson published her own accounts of the episode on Facebook and Twitter. The train's CEO subsequently apologized and declared the company had been "100 percent wrong" to kick Johnson and the others off the train.

Noting that the women witnessed "multiple groups of Caucasians who were inebriated and acting boisterous" who were not put off the train, the suit alleges the group's ejection is part of a broad pattern of discriminatory treatment:

Kicking the plaintiffs off the train gave white privilege to the passenger who verbally complained in the bar car. Clearly, this passenger did not want to share her space with these women and was treated more favorably by defendants' decision to remove all eleven plaintiffs from the train. This action shows that African Americans are policed by other patrons and by management in restaurants, theaters, and public places. African American adults are more likely to be shushed, stared at, and kicked out of places where white people perceive that they do not fit.

Plaintiffs' money was not as valuable to defendants as was the comfort of their Caucasian passengers. Defendants would rather kick plaintiffs off the train than keep their money on the train. Plaintiffs' money was not treated with equal value.

The suit also says two members of the book club were dismissed from their jobs because of the wine train's Facebook post accusing the group of verbal and physical abuse.

Johnson said at a Thursday press conference announcing the lawsuit that getting kicked off the train "was the most humiliating experience that I have ever had in my entire life. This is 2015, and this just cannot happen again."

And from the Associated Press write-up on the lawsuit:

Katherine Neal, 85, the oldest woman in the group, said she was reminded of when she was about 12 and a store clerk asked her to eat her ice cream outside while white families ate inside.

"I took this case because it's an egregious case," said McCoy, the women's attorney. "This lawsuit highlights that blacks are still being treated differently in America."

### **City doubles number of walls that spray back**

To all the late-night revelers who answer nature's call on city walls: Beware. Again.

The [Public Works Department](#) is doubling the number of walls painted with pee-repellent paint.

In July, DPW installed nine in the Tenderloin, the Mission and South of Market. Eight more will be added this week. The surfaces make urine bounce right back onto the shoes and pants of unsuspecting relief-seekers. And, so far, it seems to be working.

"So far so good," Public Works Director [Mohammed Nuru](#) said. "We have had a daily monitoring program, and it seems to be 95 percent successful. There's only one alley in the Mission that we have had trouble with."

The monitoring system consists of one lucky individual conducting a smell and sight test — anything that smells putrid or looks moist is noted. The trial period for the pee wall program ends in December, and the city will assess its effectiveness then.

But it's already been proved to work in Europe. The paint was first used in Hamburg's St. Pauli quarter, where beer drinkers often can't be bothered to find a bathroom. The experiment captured the attention of San Francisco officials.

Historically, public urination has been an issue in San Francisco. Legislation banned it in 2002 but that really didn't work, despite the threat of a \$50-to-\$500 fine. [The Pit Stop](#) program, which provides public restrooms, has contributed to a 17 percent drop in steam cleaning requests since last summer. But city officials wanted to do more.

"It went really well in Hamburg," Nuru said. "Based on that, I think this program is really going to work. It should deter people."

Signs over the walls read, “Hold it! This wall is not a public restroom. Please respect San Francisco and seek relief in an appropriate place.” They don’t explicitly state that the wall will fire back, so some surprises are in store for the unwitting relief-seeker.

Paint and installation costs a couple of hundred dollars for each wall. The coating, Ultra-Ever Dry, comes from Ultra-tech, a Florida company in the chemical cleanup and waste management business that also provided the paint for Hamburg.

The paint coats an object and creates a surface chemistry and texture with patterns of geometric shapes that have peaks, or high points, that repel most water-based and some oil-based liquids. If it continues to work, even more walls will be painted around the city.

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### UC Berkeley requests letters of recommendation from applicants — and sparks a debate

Larry Gordon

In a significant break from tradition, UC Berkeley will ask some freshman applicants to submit letters of recommendation from teachers and mentors this fall. And the UC system is studying whether all of its nine undergraduate campuses should do the same in future years as another way to choose among the avalanche of students seeking admission.

The new policy at UC Berkeley, while optional and limited this year, has triggered much debate at other UC campuses and high schools around the state about the value of such letters and whether they hurt or help the chances of public school students.

Adding even optional recommendations to all UC applications "would be a sea change," said Stephen Handel, UC's associate vice president for undergraduate admissions. Upcoming deliberation will have to measure the usefulness in admissions decisions against concerns that a change might "inadvertently disenfranchise certain students from even applying," he said.

Unlike most private universities and some public schools, UC generally has not asked for recommendations in its main undergraduate applications. It relies instead on high school grades, standardized test scores, personal essays and a review of students' accomplishments and personal challenges.

Only a few specialized UC programs currently require such letters, and some campuses seek extra information about a very small number of students months after the original application deadline, officials said.

UC Berkeley had planned to ask, but not require, all undergraduate applicants this fall to submit two letters of recommendation, including one from a teacher. But that idea sparked opposition statewide and was reduced in scope, probably to about what a faculty leader estimated will be 20% of the application pool. Berkeley says it wants to adopt the practice next year for all applicants.

Meanwhile, a committee of UC admissions officers is studying various changes to the online application that all nine undergraduate campuses share, including whether letters should be implemented systemwide. A report is expected this fall, and proposed policy changes face review by faculty and top UC administrators, officials said.

Supporters say a recommendation letter can boost the chances of a deserving student whose test scores don't fully reflect his or her achievements and who did not have help from parents or private consultants in writing personal statements.

Critics question the letters' worth in predicting college success and say they can reinforce advantages of well-connected students and those who attend private high schools with small classes and ample counseling staff.

The proposal arose from UC Berkeley's faculty Senate to help admissions officers make increasingly difficult choices — only 17% of the 78,923 applicants were offered admission this year.

With so many students submitting stellar grades, it is important to tell whether they have the personal and academic skills "to survive in a very competitive and very large university

environment," said Panos Papadopoulos, who chaired the Berkeley Senate during the plan's approval.

Others in UC worried that Berkeley's idea broke systemwide policies and would confuse applicants since students often use the online application to apply to several UC campuses at the same time.

Youlonda Copeland-Morgan, UCLA's associate vice chancellor for enrollment management, said recommendations raise too many administrative and "equity" issues.

"The pros have not outweighed the cons," she said. Students in big public schools "do not always have access to counselors who really know them and can advocate for them." And those teachers and counselors may not have the time to write adequate letters, she added.

Berkeley retreated partly for this fall and probably will invite letters from just 20% or so of this year's applicants, mainly those whose prospects are between certain acceptance and rejection, according to Papadopoulos, a mechanical engineering professor.

All applicants will be invited to submit letters in fall 2016, he said, noting that other public universities, including those in Michigan and Virginia, long have done so.

For years, a very small portion of students on the cusp of UC admission received "augmented" review, with some campuses seeking comment from teachers, counselors and students in the winter or early spring. Only 5.7% of applicants to Berkeley's current freshman class had that augmented look, according to Amy Jarich, UC Berkeley's associate vice chancellor and director of undergraduate admission.

The proposal to invite everyone to submit letters aimed to "be more inclusive," she said, adding that students' chances would not be hurt if they declined to do so. UC Berkeley hired extra admissions staff in part to handle larger workloads reading the letters, she said.

Jarich said she thought the letters could help students from large public schools and low-income families who may not receive editing on their essays. Letters can help "point us to the very best kid in the class, even if the standardized test scores are not the highest in the class," she said.

A teacher or counselor can describe a young person in ways that some students cannot or will not do about themselves, she said.

A survey by the National Assn. of College Admission Counseling, found that counselors' letters were of "considerable importance" to about 16% of colleges and of moderate importance to about 44% and that teachers' letters were weighed nearly the same.

Grades in college prep courses, standardized test scores and student essays were valued more highly although personal interviews mattered less, the survey found. Highly selective institutions and small, usually private ones tend to want the letters, said David Hawkins, the admission association's executive director for educational content and policy.

Colleges recognize "what constitutes a really good recommendation and what constitutes just going through the motions," Hawkins said. In some cases, a counselor might add a note inviting a private phone call, for good or bad, and sometimes the wording raises questions colleges can understand "between the lines," he said.

At Northwood High School in Irvine, counselor Anne Goins said that submitting letters would not be a burden if it is limited to the most competitive UC campuses, such as Berkeley and UCLA; students applying there usually also apply to private colleges requiring letters and those can be copied for UC.

If all nine UC schools seek the recommendations, she said she would write the extra letters and "do what's best for the kids."

John Kim, college counselor at Belmont High School near downtown Los Angeles, said he worries that requests for recommendations throughout UC could scare off some students from applying if they don't feel close enough to a counselor or teacher.

"It's asking a lot more from the students and the high schools for something that will have a very minimal effect on whether the kids get in or not," he said, but he added that he would write them if asked.