

Grass is greener on the other side

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Lured by water bill credits, homeowners out west are ripping out their grass. But irrigation and landscape contractors are hardly complaining.

When the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) began offering homeowners money to rip up their lawns in an effort to conserve water, you could easily imagine irrigation and landscape contractors gasping and grabbing their chests. No turf means no need for landscape maintenance, and certainly no need for irrigation, right?

Wrong, says Joe Fortier, and Fortier should know. He's the founder of Mojave Water Management, an irrigation consulting firm, and a former employee of the SNWA who helped develop and implement many of its conservation programs.

"It's actually providing more work for irrigation and landscape contractors," Fortier says of the "cash for grass" program. "When people want to retrofit, they have to retrofit the landscape and irrigation to drip irrigation for plant materials that are there. And there's usually not a big reduction in lawn maintenance because landscape professionals still come back, clean up the yard and maintain the irrigation system. Sometimes pruning and clean up takes the place of mowing."

For or against?

The program actually creates additional work for Green Industry professionals and credits homeowners up to a maximum of \$1,000 on their water bills. It also makes everyone feel good about doing their part to conserve a valuable resource. But there could be a day when people like Fortier will not support the program.

"If it stays a volunteer program, I'm all for it," Fortier says. "If it becomes mandatory, I'm against it."

Don Crawford, Western Director of Landscape Services for Camden Property Trust and board member of the Water Conservation Coalition, agrees with Fortier: "This program is only smart if it's done at the right place at the right time."

Even though commercial properties can earn a water bill credit of up to \$50,000 (and Crawford has taken advantage of that), he won't just rip up turf everywhere.

"I won't take out grass where it doesn't make sense," Crawford says. "If I'm watering a skinny strip of turf and getting more water on the hardscape than the turf, it makes sense to replace the turf. We're doing these things anyway because it's the right thing to do."

The right solution?

Irrigation contractors are benefitting from additional work the program has created, but is it really helping to conserve water? A study done by Arizona State University Professor of Urban Horticulture Chris Martin suggests that it may not be.

"Two things happen: the drip irrigation system is either mismanaged or not managed at all," Martin says. "The homeowner will just set the clock and walk away. Water used in the landscape tends to follow the seasonal course of evapotranspiration — it increases in summer and decreases in winter. With drip, the pattern is unchanged from summer to winter."

"The best way to conserve water is to plant fewer plants," he says. "If you're looking at an absolute savings of water, replacing turf is a good thing. You're reducing canopy cover and water application. But it's not going to magically save water."

'Cash for grass'

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■ The City of Corona, CA, for instance,

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offers free water conservation classes to the public. One class in irrigation design is sponsored by a local irrigation supplier. After homeowners complete all four classes, they can apply for a mini-grant of \$500 to make their yard more water efficient.

■ In Glendale, AZ, homeowners can receive a \$500 rebate for converting 50% or more of their grass to water efficient plantings.

■ In Florida, there's a bill in the state legislature that would allow people in deed-restricted communities to grow something other than water-intensive St. Augustinegrass.

■ The National Wildlife Federation offers an official backyard wildlife habitat seal to those who curtail their lawns in favor of native plants that feed and shelter indigenous wildlife and require less pesticides and water.