Irrigation Cutbacks for Conservation, Less Water, More Weeds, Dead Trees.

Loren Oki, CE Specialist, Landscape Horticulture, Department of Plant Sciences, UC Davis

Following four years of drought, the Governor mandated a statewide 25% reduction in water use in 2015. In single family homes, about half of the household water use is for outdoor purposes, including irrigation. Indoor conservation measures tend to be previously implemented, but this is usually not the case for outdoor uses. Most of the outdoor use is for irrigation and turf has been labeled as a high water user. But, it is okay to reduce irrigation to the turf and let quality diminish. However, there has been a range of responses from reductions in applications to completely shutting off all irrigation. The issue is that when irrigation to turf is reduced, trees that are planted in or near the turf and have become dependent on irrigation become stressed or are killed. This is because turf irrigation tends to be done improperly with short, frequent applications that result in shallow roots. Proper irrigations should wet the soil deeply, to a depth of 12" for turf, but most applications are much shallower. Because of this the irrigation reductions have resulted in poorly performing turf, sometimes exposing soil that facilitates weed invasions, and stresses trees.

It is important to recognize water stress symptoms and provide water to trees before their health is compromised. Water stressed trees are susceptible to infestation by insects, such as borers, and diseases, such as root rots. When providing irrigation to trees, properly placing irrigation is important to facilitate water uptake. Applications should be near the drip line of the tree canopy where most of the roots that absorb water are located and not at the base of the tree near its trunk, which can compromise tree health. Water should be applied slowly and should wet the soil to a depth of 2-3 feet depending on the tree species, age, soil type, and other factors.