Summary:
AB 1573 reduces unnecessary outdoor water use by putting local native plants to work, saving natural resources while supporting California’s globally significant but imperiled biodiversity. It would create new requirements for low-water native plant landscaping on nonresidential properties as a replacement for non-functional turf.

Background:
California is at the forefront of climate change, as it experiences the real-time impacts of extreme weather, water shortages, and the nation’s highest levels of species loss. Action is needed now to conserve natural resources while protecting the state’s remarkable biodiversity. This bill helps unite a growing body of California public policy aimed at water conservation, biodiversity protection, and urban greening.

California belongs to one of the world’s 36 global biodiversity hotspots, due both to the wide variety of native plants and animals and high threat levels to that biodiversity. A recently published report by NatureServe found that 34% of plants and 40% of animal species in the U.S. are at risk of extinction, with California, Texas, and the Southwest leading the way. California -- the state with the greatest diversity of plant species in the nation and home to 40% of North America’s native bee populations -- also has the highest percentage of at-risk species for these vital plants and pollinators.

In tandem with the state’s growing biodiversity crisis, California’s water supply is dire. The Colorado River Basin, a major source of water for Southern California’s urban areas, is deteriorating rapidly. The Commissioner of the US Bureau of Reclamation has stated that reductions of water withdrawals of from 2 to 4 million acre-feet per year, or as much as 1/3 of the recent annual usage of Colorado River water, will be needed to protect water and power operations at Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams, and avoid catastrophic depletion of Lakes Powell and Mead. California and neighboring states have offered different scenarios for Reclamation to consider, but the proposals put forward all envision major reductions, a significant share of which will inevitably fall on California’s urban water users.

Today, roughly half of all publicly supplied water is used primarily for landscape irrigation, and much of that irrigation is potable water used on non-functional turf, and turf is the number one irrigated crop in the United States. This bill calls on public works, commercial, and other non-residential projects to help reverse these trends by using local native plants adapted to low-water conditions. In addition to being a scarce resource, water is energy-intensive to make potable and transport. Moving to native plant landscapes will realize reductions in energy use, water use, and greenhouse gas emissions based on reduced inputs and maintenance needs of these landscapes.

Already, California is moving strongly in this direction. Through an emergency declaration, the State Water Board has prohibited the use of potable water to irrigate nonfunctional turf in commercial, industrial, and institutional locations through June 2023. Meanwhile California’s Model Water Efficiency Landscape Ordinance is designed to prevent water waste in landscaping.
Concurrently, California Executive Order N-82-20 recognizes that “the State’s long-term vitality is threatened by the loss of biodiversity” and calls for state agencies to “reinvigorate populations of pollinators,” and build climate resilience on our lands, including urban greenspaces. The order further directs California’s agencies to “prioritize investments in ...actions that promote biodiversity protection, habitat restoration, wildfire-resilient, sustainably managed landscapes and other conservation outcomes.”

The dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change require urgent solutions. The use of California native plants in landscaping offers a hopeful, practical, and beautiful way to conserve vital resources, support pollinators, and help people across the state connect with nature.

AB 1573 (as amended on March 23, 2023):

- Requires all nonresidential projects to use low-water plants, beginning with at least 25% local native plants by Jan 1, 2026; then 50% local native plants by Jan. 1, 2030, and 75% by Jan. 1, 2035.
- Creates a definition for “local native plants.”
- Requires all non-residential projects to eliminate the use of non-functional turf after January 1, 2026, and sets the strongest level of water conservation requirements for non-residential landscapes.

Support:  
California Native Plant Society (sponsor)

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