



Developing Colorado's Turf Replacement Program

By Alexa Kelly

An estimated 3.3 million people in Colorado are affected by drought, with 2022 being the driest year to date over the past 128 years.¹ In response to the ongoing drought in Colorado, the General Assembly passed [House Bill 22-1151](#) to promote the efficient and maximum utilization of Colorado's water resources by decreasing the amount of irrigated turf within the state. The bill requires the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) in the Department of Natural Resources to create a turf replacement program that incentivizes the voluntary replacement of nonessential irrigated turf across the state.

Definition of Turf

In Colorado's semi-arid climate, many grasses need supplemental irrigation to stay healthy and green. Examples of turf that require more irrigation compared to others include Kentucky Bluegrass, turf-type tall fescue, and perennial ryegrass. Beyond the typical lawn, there are many uses for irrigated turf, including parks, sports fields, and playgrounds. However, much of the irrigated turf in Colorado is nonessential and located in areas that receive little to no use.

Examples of nonessential turf. Any turf that is purely ornamental and not used for recreation generally qualifies as nonessential turf. Examples of nonessential turf listed in HB 22-1151 include turf used for:

- medians;

- areas adjacent to open spaces or transportation corridors;
- areas sloped with more than a 25 percent grade;
- storm water drainage and detention basins;
- commercial, institutional, or industrial properties;
- common elements in a common interest community; and
- portions of residential yards.

Statewide Turf Replacement Program

The General Assembly allocated \$2.0 million for CWCB to administer a statewide Turf Replacement Program beginning in July 2023. CWCB is currently working to develop guidelines and details on the application process, which are expected to become available in Spring 2023.²

Eligibility and funding. The bill specifies the types of entities that are eligible to apply for funding from CWCB. These eligible entities include:

- local governments;
- special districts (including water districts, metropolitan districts, and water conservancy or conservation districts);
- nonprofit organizations; and
- Native American tribes.

Any applicant must provide up to 50 percent of the costs to develop and implement a local program.

¹U.S. Drought Monitor Conditions for Colorado, National Integrated Drought Information System, <https://www.drought.gov/states/colorado>.

²<https://cwcb.colorado.gov/turf>

Individual program development. CWCB, and any partnering contractors, may use money from the program to cover any direct and indirect costs associated with developing turf replacement programs. These individual, local programs must be designed to require that removed turf is replaced with a minimum percentage of living, lower water-use, native, and pollinator-friendly plant species. The program must also emphasize the creation and maintenance of defensible space to reduce wildfire risk. Local programs may also offer rebates or in-kind or subsidized goods or services to property owners as a way to incentivize the voluntary participation in the program.

Restrictions. Money from the program may not be used to replace existing turf with impermeable concrete, artificial turf, water features, invasive plant species, or new turf. The bill also does not allow individual homeowners to apply for funding to replace their home's turf. Local entities that receive funding from CWCB to develop a turf replacement program may allow homeowners and other property owners to apply for money to replace turf on their property.

Allowable uses of funding. The bill specifies how grant recipients may use money received through the program. Those receiving funds from the program may use money for the cost of all design materials, plantings, and labor required for any landscaping and irrigation system modifications and to update existing irrigation systems to provide more efficient irrigation.

Existing Turf Replacement Funding

There are currently other opportunities to seek funding for turf replacement.

Colorado Water Plan Grant Program. Eligible entities can apply for turf replacement funding through the Water Plan Grant Program. More information about the program can be found here:

³Water Smart Landscapes Rebate.
<https://www.snwa.com/rebates/wsl/index.html>
⁴[Nevada Assembly Bill No. 356](#)
<https://www.leg.state.nv.us/App/NELIS/REL/81st2021/Bill/7910/Txt#>

<https://cwcb.colorado.gov/funding/colorado-water-plan-grants>.

Local Turf Replacement Programs

Cities and local water providers, including Castle Rock, Greeley, and Aurora Water, currently provide incentives for the conversion of turf to water-wise landscapes. Individuals may wish to contact their local government or water provider to determine if these types of resources are available in their area.

Turf Replacement Programs in the West

Turf replacement programs are encouraging water-wise landscaping in other areas of the West as well. The Southern Nevada Water Authority Water Smart Landscape Rebate Program has removed 200 million square feet of grass and saved approximately 152 billion gallons of water since the program began in 1999. The program provides a rebate of \$3 per square foot of grass removed and replaced with desert landscaping up to 10,000 square feet, and \$1.50 for anything more.³

In addition, a law enacted by the Nevada legislature in 2021 prohibits using Colorado River water delivered by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to irrigate nonessential turf. The law also requires the removal of this grass from commercial, multi-family, government, and other properties by the end of 2026.⁴

Several cities across Arizona and Utah, including Scottsdale, Tempe, and Salt Lake City offer rebates for turf replacement. The programs are primarily run by city water providers or water conservancy districts and are aimed at incentivizing the replacement of turf with more water-wise landscaping. In Tempe, 115,568 square feet of turf were replaced in 2021. The initiative is estimated to save 3.5 million gallons of water each year.⁵

⁵ Tempe Landscape Conversion Rebate.
<https://www.tempe.gov/government/municipal-utilities/water/water-conservation/rebates/landscape-conversion>.