

## The Lawn Goodbye

AMERICA HAS A fascinating history with lawns.

According to research published by NASA in 2005, grass is the most grown crop in the U.S. Lawns covered an estimated 63,000 square miles at the time—roughly the size of Texas. That's a lot of land dedicated to something we can't eat and that is primarily a design aesthetic.

Interestingly, the grasses that are commonly used for lawns aren't native to this side of the Atlantic. Guinea grass and Bermuda grass from Africa are common



throughout the south. The latter is used for levee stabilization. Kentucky bluegrass came from Europe and the Middle East. It spread throughout the Appalachian Mountains and the Midwest and is now the most favored lawn grass. In the West, Spanish soldiers and missionaries brought seeds from the Mediterranean.

Our obsession with lawns might have started with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The founding fathers were emulating the styles of French and English country estates at their own retreats, Mount Vernon and Monticello, respectively. As images of Mount Vernon were produced and distributed through-

out the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries, wealthy Americans had something to copy.

There are a lot of other fun facts about the history of lawns. One thing is certain: A nice one requires time, money, and plenty of water—not to mention pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers.

At least out West, the long, national obsession may finally be over. Drought brought on by climate change has many community associations making a commitment to pulling up grass and installing more sustainable landscaping. Others are turning to smart irrigation systems to reduce water consumption and even relaxing enforcement of landscaping maintenance. Read "Coming Up Dry" by Pamela Babcock on p. 16 for specifics.

You'll find that the colors, textures, and benefits of drought-tolerant plants are far from brown and boring. These are historic changes born out of a historic drought.

Meanwhile, historic changes also are underway with how condominiums conduct reserve studies, how they set aside money for reserve funds, and how buildings are inspected and maintained.

This year, CAI will be advocating for change with federal and state legislators and regulators to protect condominium residents after the devastating collapse of Champlain Tower South last June. Read "Safety Measures" on p. 28 for an overview of CAI's recommendations and how they came together.

I hope you have a happy and healthy new year. What change will you affect in 2022?

*Daniel*

DANIEL BRANNIGAN, MANAGING EDITOR

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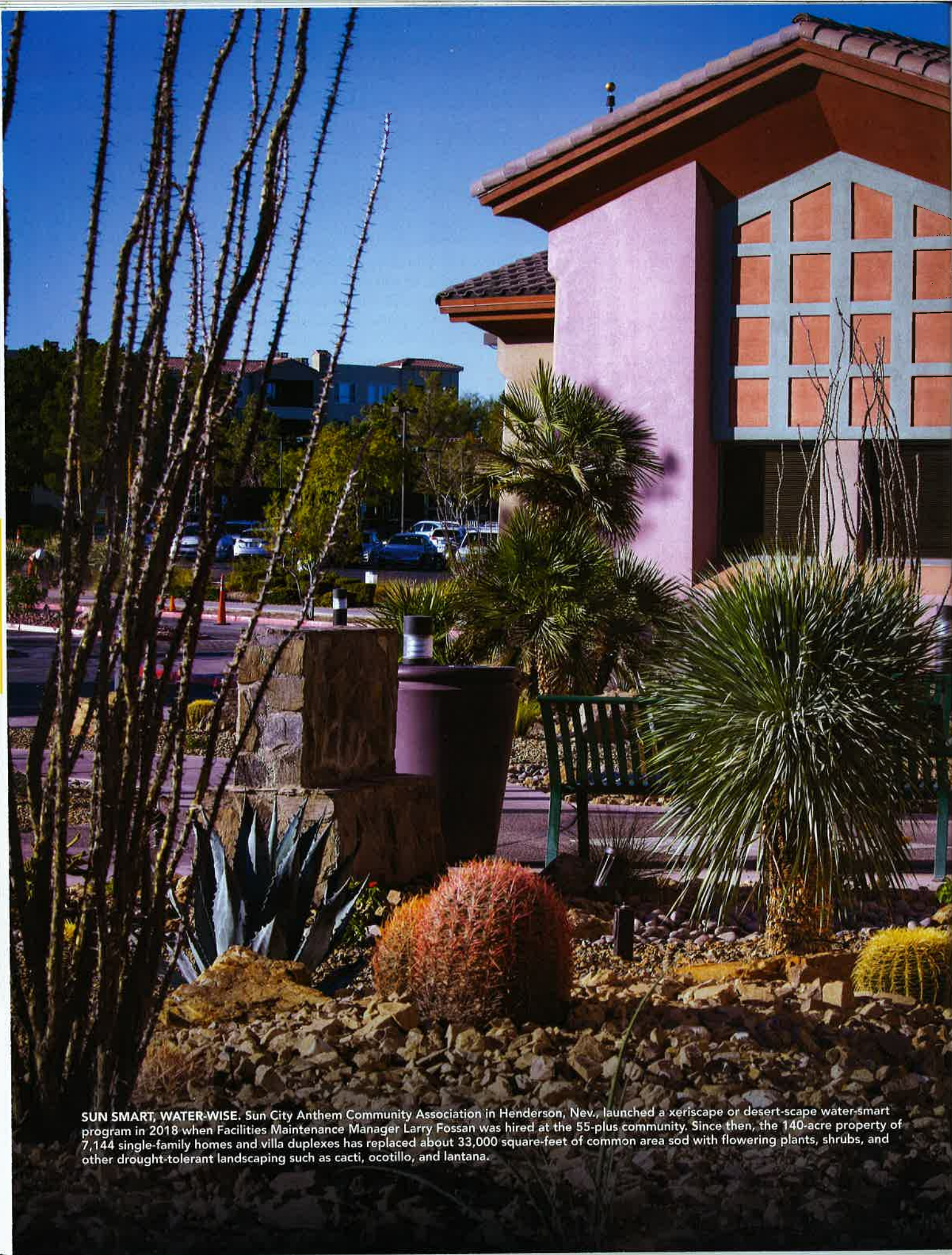


## picture this

**DRAINING SIGHT.** A boat cruises past mineral-stained rocks on the upstream side of the Hoover Dam this past summer in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada. Lake Mead, North America's largest artificial reservoir, dropped to its lowest level since being filled in 1937 after the construction of the Hoover Dam. The declining water levels are a result of a nearly continuous drought for the past two decades coupled with increased water demands in the Southwestern U.S. The drought has left a white "bathtub ring" of mineral deposits from higher water levels on the rocks around the lake. Read "Coming Up Dry" for more on the drought effects and what communities are doing to address them. See p. 16.

GETTY IMAGES NEWS /  
ETHAN MILLER





**SUN SMART, WATER-WISE.** Sun City Anthem Community Association in Henderson, Nev., launched a xeriscape or desert-scape water-smart program in 2018 when Facilities Maintenance Manager Larry Fossan was hired at the 55-plus community. Since then, the 140-acre property of 7,144 single-family homes and villa duplexes has replaced about 33,000 square-feet of common area sod with flowering plants, shrubs, and other drought-tolerant landscaping such as cacti, ocotillo, and lantana.



# COMING UP

**The lawn? Gone. The sprinkler? Saved.  
The rules? Relaxed. Community associations reorient  
to a severe and widespread drought out West.**

**A**s much of the Western U.S. is in the grips of a worsening drought brought on by climate change, state and local governments have looked for ways to conserve water by banning nonfunctional grass, establishing watering restrictions, and offering rebates to businesses and homeowners who install drought-resistant or water-wise landscaping and adopt other water conservation measures.

Recognizing the severity of the problem, many community associations are making a commitment to drought mitigation by pulling up grass and installing more sustainable landscaping. Others are turning to smart irrigation systems to reduce consumption and even relaxing enforcement of landscaping maintenance.

The drought isn't a fleeting crisis but "the shape of things to come," writes climate scientist Justin S. Mankin, an assistant professor of geography at Dartmouth College and co-lead of the NOAA Drought Task Force, in *The Washington Post*. Current condi-

tions are the most severe and widespread "in the modern era, punctuating a 20-year period as dry as any time in at least the past 1,200 years," he adds.

Last summer, Hoover Dam's Lake Mead on the Colorado River, the country's largest reservoir, dropped to its lowest level since the 1930s. "With the lowest rain and snow and the third-highest temperatures on record since at least 1895, this drought covers an astounding 94 percent of the Western United States," Mankin writes. He adds, "The danger is that state and federal governments, businesses, advocates, and other groups will continue to manage this drought as a disaster—a short-term event that requires emergency responses—rather than what it is: a transition to permanent water loss."

Mankin writes that responding at scale requires reorienting "resources, institutions, regulations, supply chains, and household practices to this drier reality."

Some community associations are adapting to this new reality. Here's how.

**BY PAMELA BABCOCK**

## INVIGORATING LANDSCAPING

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak in July signed a law that bans nonfunctional grass for Southern Nevada Water Authority customers to help address shortages at Lake Mead and the Colorado River—the region's primary water sources. Nonfunctional grass is defined as grass surrounding parking lots, office parks, in street medians, and common areas in multifamily properties that are not actively used for recreation. All will have to be replaced by Jan. 1, 2027.

Sun City Anthem Community Association in Henderson, Nev., has a head start thanks to a xeriscape or desert-scape water-smart program launched in 2018 when Facilities Maintenance Manager Larry Fossan was hired at the 55-plus community. Since then, the 140-acre property of 7,144 single-family homes and villa duplexes has replaced about 33,000 square feet of common area sod with flowering plants, shrubs and other drought-tolerant landscaping such as

cacti, ocotillo, and lantana. Fossan estimates the move has saved 30 million gallons of water. Sun City Anthem expects to remove about 5 acres of turf by the end of 2026.

The community also cut down ash trees and large pines, replacing them with less thirsty and easier to maintain varieties such as desert willows, mountain laurels, and crepe myrtles. At first, not everyone was pleased.

"When I came here in 2018 to start these projects, the homeowners literally put a bullseye on my back when I started cutting down 20-year-old pine trees that were 40

feet tall," Fossan recalls. To get ahead of the problem, he offered naysayers a two-hour landscape tour so he could educate them on what the community was doing and why they were doing it. He also showed them all the colors, textures, and benefits of drought-tolerant plants. Year-round color is even drawing more hummingbirds and butterflies for residents to enjoy.

"They're actually loving it and are out there with their cameras taking photos of butterflies," Fossan says. Saving water means lower bills and less maintenance for owners. This year alone, Fossan says the community's water bills were reduced by about \$70,000.

Sun City Anthem also is swapping out sprinklers for smart controllers that factor in temperature, humidity, wind, and

soil moisture to decide how much water plants need and when they need it. Today, Fossan says the majority of owners are on board. "Larry's Team," an informal group of about two dozen walkers and bicyclists, even call Fossan to report sprinkler leaks.

The community also has 28 weather stations and a nursery where it grows about 250 plants including Mexican feathergrass, lantana, and cacti with cuttings from plants already in the community's landscape. Many are later relocated on the property, saving even more money.

Fossan, who is the only landscape expert on the Southern Nevada Water Authority's turf removal committee, has given nearly 60 tours to leaders of large community associations and others in the state eager to see how Sun City Anthem is conserving water.

**BEAUTY AND SAVINGS.** Sun City Anthem estimates it has saved 30 million gallons of water since 2018. Some residents were skeptical of the desert-scaping plan, but a tour of the colors, textures, and benefits of drought-tolerant plants in the community (seen in photos on this page and p. 20) has converted naysayers.





Doug Bradford, communications director for the community, says he never imagined a tour of landscaping “could be so invigorating and thrilling until ‘Landscape Larry’ takes you out.” Fossan can’t help it: “I’m a little enthusiastic about ‘my kids,’” he says.

### ‘THE RIGHT THING TO DO’

Gov. Gavin Newsom called on Californians in July to voluntarily reduce water use by 15%. Though supplies in Coachella Valley are healthy, droughts in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and on the Colorado River are spurring communities such as Canyon Estates Homeowners Association

in Palm Springs into action.

“Water conservation efforts are critical and the right thing to do because if we run out of water, we’re all going to be hurting,” says Christopher Brodwell, Canyon Estates’ board president and a member of the community’s water conservation committee. The classic mid-century modern community was built beginning in the late 1960s and has 254 condominium-style single-family homes on nearly 80 acres.

Over the past five years, Canyon Estates has installed more efficient irrigation systems, added drought-tolerant landscaping on its golf course, replaced

grass on several corner common area lots, and updated landscaping and irrigation systems at its pools, tennis courts, and maintenance yard.

Meanwhile, several owners have transformed their front yards by replacing grass with indigenous plants and shrubs that require little water. The community’s architecture and grounds committee reviews such requests. The community also encourages owners to consider artificial turf.

“It’s easily maintained and looks like regular grass since there are a lot of different levels to it,” notes Larry Pfander, manager at Canyon Estates Homeowners

## NO MOW, JUST BLOW

In a recent special edition newsletter designed to spur owners to use less water, Canyon Estates Homeowners Association in Palm Springs, Calif., featured yards that are “no mow, just blow.” When one couple moved to the community in 2018, they saw a perfect opportunity to conserve water while also creating a natural appearance better suited to the home’s mid-century architecture.

One of the owners had done something similar when he owned a home in Illinois and created a more natural aesthetic by replacing the turf with indigenous native prairie plants. After interviewing landscape architects, the pair selected Hermann Design Group, a firm that had worked on Canyon Estates’ golf course water-friendly project and was well-versed in the community’s approved plant palette.

Changes (below, right) include a new driveway, walkway, and patio along with a “softscape” of artificial turf and desert native plants. Artificial turf can be pricey—estimates ranged from \$5 to \$20 per square foot—but a Desert Water Agency (DWA) rebate helped. According to the newsletter, their water bill has dropped and maintenance is a breeze since the area only requires an annual turf “brushing” and minimal plant trimming.

Elsewhere at Canyon Estates, a former New Jersey couple replaced its grass front lawn with a desert landscape (below, left) after being inspired by other Palm Springs homeowners who had done the same. Their plan cost about \$7,500, and they received a modest rebate from the DWA. The pair is very pleased with the outcome and wouldn’t have done anything differently. Their only advice? “Just do it, and don’t overplant.” —P.B.







Association. "It's green year-round. You literally have to go up and touch it to know it's not real." To date, about 10 residents have installed faux grass.

Canyon Estates encourages owners to work with the local Desert Water Agency (DWA) to secure rebates, which currently are \$2 per square foot. The DWA website also features a guide to plants likely to thrive with little water as well as a list of landscapers that have completed its water conservation program.

In a somewhat controversial move, the board

voted 8 to 1 in September to not overseed grassy areas and to allow existing grass to brown a bit during the winter. To try to maintain lush lawns year-round, Canyon Estates typically had Bermuda grass in the summer. In the fall, the community would "scalp" the Bermuda grass, plant winter rye, and "water the heck out of it," Brodwell explains. The decision didn't sit well with everyone, particularly more seasonal residents who come from other parts of the country and expect green grass.

Brodwell's unsure if Canyon Estates will do the same next year, but he says educating owners about issues raking can cause for people with allergies and breathing disorders helped garner greater acceptance. "There is a new and different way of doing things that will be better for the environment and better for the community," he says.

#### LAWN AND ORDER

Concerns over water by San Diego-area community associations have kept Miguel A. Sibrian, field manager at Green Valley Landscape & Maintenance in Escondido, Calif., busy.

"Some just need to water the right way, some may need to update their equipment to be more efficient by installing smart controllers, replacing older high-water use sprinklers with more efficient ones such as MP (matched precipitation) rotator or drip systems," Sibrian says. Some are removing grassy areas and installing drought resistant plants with drip irrigation emitters or bubblers.

Sibrian and his company worked with Mission Garden, a single-family community with 72 units in Oceanside, Calif., to convert about 5 acres of common property from grass to drought-resistant plants, rocks, and other materials. A rebate from the Metropolitan Water District helped. "It ended up paying for most of the work that was done," Sibrian says.

Owners are still keenly attached to "nice green lawns" and they don't want the front yard to look like a "desert in Arizona," Sibrian says. "But once you present them a good design and explain to them that the new plants don't necessarily need to be cactuses," they're usually OK. **CG**

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# PROACTIVE PACT

In May, Utah Gov. Spencer J. Cox declared a state of emergency due to drought conditions and implemented steps to mitigate the water crisis. Among them, he said watering should only be done twice a week in northern Utah and three times a week in southern Utah. Cox also said watering shouldn't be done when winds are greater than 5 mph or during the hottest period of day (10 a.m. to 8 p.m. in southern Utah and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. elsewhere.) He recommended prioritizing watering trees first followed by shrubs, perennials, annuals, and grass; he also suggested that mower blades should be raised to 3 to 4 inches from the ground.

"We're in the worst drought here in Utah in over 100 years, and so everyone is wanting to do what we can to help use less water," explains Michael D. Johnson, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, CEO of HOALiving in Draper, Utah, which manages about 500 properties with about 46,000 homes.

In a proactive move to show that community associations aren't ignoring the problem, the CAI Utah Chapter drafted a drought compact that has been signed by more than 2,000 of the state's community associations and business partners. Johnson authored the pact, which says signees are committed to encouraging "common sense relaxation" of landscaping installation and maintenance requirements in governing documents. It recommends the following steps:

■ **DEFER LANDSCAPING INSTALLATION TIMELINES FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION.** Community associations should ease up on requirements that new home landscaping be installed by a certain deadline until Utah's drought mitigation actions are removed.

■ **RELAX ENFORCEMENT OF SOME LANDSCAPING MAINTENANCE COVENANTS.** Don't penalize owners for yellowing and dry areas of grass when watering is significantly reduced, and follow local orders regarding watering common areas and open spaces. Owners should still keep weeds abated.

■ **ADOPT WATER-WISE LANDSCAPING.** Consider best practices for sustainable landscaping and fairly evaluate owner requests to convert to or to utilize sustainable landscaping on their exclusive-use property.

Community associations can offer this type of flexibility because, under Utah's condominium and community association laws, boards can use "reasonable judgment" to determine whether to impose sanctions for a violation of governing documents. A board is not required to take enforcement action if it determines, after fair review and acting in good faith, that under the particular circumstances, the covenant, restriction, or rule is likely to be construed as inconsistent with current law.

Johnson says communities should revisit requirements that mandate a certain percentage, such as 70%, of irrigated sod on an owner's property. Communities should consider water-wise options such as xeriscaping, artificial turf, rock, or sandstone that would bring variety that could add value to a community.

Boards should make decisions in the best interests of their specific community. "There's no one-size-fits-all solution," Johnson says.

While the properties his company manages don't have "water police," Johnson says there are plenty of eagle-eyed residents who are happy to report excess watering. Johnson notes that, in 2021, his company received only half as many calls from owners concerned about a neighbor's landscaping and watering activities. "I think even those nonbelievers are seeing the seriousness of the situation," he says.

Johnson hopes the pact helps soften any perceptions from state legislators and critics who think that community associations are using an excess amount of water.

"We can self-police our industry. We don't need heavy-handed new laws," he says. —P.B.

**POWELL PROBLEM.** Last summer, water levels on Lake Powell, on the borders of southeastern Utah and northeastern Arizona, fell to the lowest point since 1969. As of late September, the lake, part of the Colorado River Basin, held just 30% of its capacity. Lake Powell is the second-largest reservoir by capacity in the U.S.

