



What residential customers need to know before installing a water softener

Most of Southern California has water that is considered “hard” because it contains a high concentration of minerals such as calcium. While these minerals do not affect the safety of your water, they can leave white spots on glassware or shower doors. For that reason, some residents are interested in installing a water softener in their home. Here is some important information you should know when considering water softening devices.

Does Irvine Ranch Water District ban water softeners?

Irvine Ranch Water District (IRWD) bans water softeners in commercial and industrial settings only. From the 1970s until 1997, IRWD did ban *self-regenerating* water softeners for all users. This is the type of device in which the user must pour bags of rock salt or potassium chloride on a regular basis. The reason IRWD had this ban in place was that these types of devices discharge hundreds of pounds of salt brine into the sewer system each year. That salt brine poses a problem because agricultural fields and approximately 80 percent of the public area landscaping (golf courses, parks, school grounds, street medians, commercial landscaping, homeowner associations, etc.) are irrigated with recycled water and salts cannot be cost-effectively removed from wastewater during the recycling process. These salts damage plants. It is important to note that even when this ban was in effect, IRWD did not prohibit the use of *exchange tank* softeners. The difference is that exchange tank softeners are serviced by a company that removes the spent tanks for disposal and no salt brine is placed into the sewer system.

What's changed?

Court cases brought elsewhere in the state ruled that more work needed to be done before water agencies could enact bans on water softeners. IRWD and other agencies are currently involved in doing that research regarding all sources of salt in wastewater.

What's the status now?

Legislation in the state of California (SB 1006) provided a three-year “grace period,” or a temporary reprieve against bans on self-regenerative water softeners. Additionally, SB 1006 established criteria which water agencies must fulfill before establishing a ban. That grace period expired on January 1, 2003. IRWD expects that studies will show a continuing need for local regulations that allow agencies to manage and regulate all sources of increased salinity, which may include reinstating a ban on self-regenerative water softeners in the future.

What do water softeners have to do with water conservation and the environment?

For areas like IRWD, where recycled water is widely used, self-regenerating water softeners have a great deal to do with both conservation and the environment. Southern California is a semi-arid climate where water conservation is extremely important. Every gallon of recycled water that can be used to irrigate a park or golf course is a gallon of drinking water that can be saved for drinking. Using recycled water in this way helps stretch limited water resources. IRWD's wide use of recycled water also helps keep water rates low for all users. Using recycled water for irrigation reduces the amount of costly imported water that must be purchased from the Metropolitan Water District. If recycled water becomes too salty to use for irrigation, it will have major impacts on water availability and costs for all customers.

Whose permission do I need to install a water softener?

It is a statewide requirement that prior to installation of a self-regenerating water softener customers have a C-55 or C-36 contractor certify 1) device efficiency and 2) installation of water saving devices. That certification must be filed with the permitting agency (city or county). Exchange tank systems do not require certification.

What's the bottom line?

IRWD recommends that customers who choose to use a water softener select the environmentally sensitive alternative of an exchange tank system. If you have additional questions, please contact the IRWD Public Affairs Dept. at (949) 453-5500.