

EPA Finalizes Specs for WaterSense New Homes

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released its final WaterSense single-family new homes specification on Thursday, Dec. 10. WaterSense is a government-sponsored marketing program for businesses interested in promoting their goods as water efficient.

Qualifying homes will feature water-efficient landscaping, WaterSense labeled plumbing fixtures, Energy Star qualified appliances (if any) and efficient hot-water delivery systems, so homeowners do not waste water and energy waiting for hot water. The landscape criteria apply to the front yard of homes and "all other areas improved upon by the builder," including water features, pools, spas and areas with vegetation planted for more than temporary stabilization. WaterSense certificates will be issued after landscape installation, inspection and certification that it complies with the criteria.

The first draft of the specification banned all water features, provoking a passionate response from pond and water garden builders and associations including the International Professional Pond Contractors Association, the National Association of Pond Professionals and the Irrigation Association. Now, "ornamental water features financed, installed or sold as upgrades by the homebuilder must recirculate water and serve a beneficial use," such as wildlife habitat, stormwater management or property cooling. Water features can include fountains, ponds, waterfalls, man-made streams and other decorative, water-related constructions, according to the final specification.

Under the final specification, water features, pools and spas are treated the same as turfgrass under either of two options for landscape evaluation. The first option involves using the WaterSense Water Budget Tool on EPA's website (www.epa.gov/watersense/nhspecs/water_budget_tool.html); the other option restricts turfgrass (and water features) to 40 percent or less of all landscaped area. Lots with landscapable areas less than 1,000 square feet remain exempt from the landscape criteria.

The landscape design criteria also calls for mulching all exposed soil with 2- to 3-inch layers and vegetating slopes steeper than a 4-1 ratio (horizontal-vertical). Lots with less than 1,000 square feet of landscapable area are exempt from the landscape design criteria.

The specification also calls for a WaterSense irrigation partner to design or install and audit irrigation systems, except in areas with too few certified partners. Irrigation systems must feature rainfall-shutoff devices and qualifying irrigation controllers. (The criteria will change once the EPA releases a final WaterSense specification for weather-based irrigation controllers.) Sprinkler irrigation will be limited to turfgrass or as a component of a microirrigation system.

Three years in development, the specification is designed to certify that qualifying new homes rank as 20 percent more efficient in their water use than the typical new home. That translates to water savings of more than 10,000 gallons per house per year, the EPA said.

"These homes will save homeowners as much as \$200 a year on utility bills compared to their current homes," said Peter Silva, assistant administrator for the EPA's Office of Water.

Previous WaterSense Coverage: [EPA Gives July 7 Deadline for Revised WaterSense Program.](#)