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By CLARK MASON
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After months of delay, Healdsburg finally has approval to use reclaimed water from its sewer treatment plant to irrigate vineyards in a wide swath beyond the city.

The program, intended to offset the use of potable water during the drought, will allow for the irrigation of up to 25,000 acres in the Alexander, Dry Creek and upper Russian River valleys.

"There will be trucks ready to take the water beginning Tuesday, at 10 a.m.," said Mayor Jim Wood.

The near-drinkable water can only be used for drip irrigation of vines and not frost control. Its use will be subject to monitoring to make sure there is no runoff, or potential infiltration of groundwater, something that has concerned some landowners in Dry Creek.

Final approval came Tuesday from the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The water is free — at least for this year — but "there are a lot of conditions for anyone who wants to use the water," Wood said.

Initially, city officials estimate 10 to 15 trucks daily will haul the water away from a couple of spigots near the city's treatment plant, including from a recently extended pipeline to Kinley Drive.

But with the state Water Resources Control Board poised to possibly curtail the water rights of farmers and other users on the Russian River above Healdsburg due to the drought, demand could spike.

"If the Resources Board does curtail rights, our phone will be ringing," Healdsburg Utilities Director Terry Crowley said Wednesday.

"We wanted to make sure water is available to whoever needs it. It will be a difficult summer to get through. This water will be a critical resource," he said.

Crowley said the recycled water could make the difference between grape growers having vines next season, and having none.

"Our water is good, and ready to go. We can potentially be lifesavers to our grape and agricultural industry," City Councilman Gary Plass said.