

National Drought Group agrees further action to tackle drought through winter

Participants at the latest [National Drought Group](#) (NDG) meeting have set out further action needed now and over winter to mitigate the impacts of drought on water supplies, agriculture and the environment next year.

Senior decision makers from the Environment Agency, government, water companies and key representative groups, met today (28 September) to discuss the current situation, which – despite recent rainfall – sees most areas across England still experiencing drought conditions.

Although essential supplies of water remain safe, and many areas of England have experienced rainfall in recent weeks, reservoirs across the country continue to be at lower levels than usual. Nearly half of reservoirs were classed as exceptionally low for the time of year in the most recent [monthly water situation report](#) for August, with total reservoir stocks at 52% of total capacity on 20 September.

September rainfall has had a limited positive impact on water levels, after six months of below average rainfall. Current September rainfall totals ranged from 47% of the long-term average (LTA) in north-west England to 89% of the LTA in south-east England. Very dry soils mean that rainfall will take longer to replenish groundwater and reservoir water levels.

As a result, most of England remains in drought, with 11 of the Environment Agency's 14 areas in drought. The remaining areas classed as being in 'prolonged dry weather' include Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire; the North East; and most recently Cumbria and Lancashire, which moved to prolonged dry weather status last week. Without average rainfall over autumn and winter, it is expected that the drought will continue into 2023.

The Group discussed how the tools within the pre-agreed water company drought plans have had a positive effect on demand so far, but the Environment Agency expects water companies to continue to take all the necessary actions to mitigate the impact of the drought by implementing their drought plans. This includes applying for drought permits and drought orders where required to increase their water supplies.

The following drought permits have recently been submitted to the Environment Agency by water companies:

1. South West Water have applied for a drought permit to manage the abstraction of water from the Tamar Lakes in Cornwall
2. Yorkshire Water have applied for drought permits to conserve water by reducing the flows out of the North West group of reservoirs
3. South East Water have applied for a drought permit to manage the

- abstraction of water from the Ardingly (River Ouse) reservoir
4. Thames Water have applied for a drought permit to manage the abstraction of water from the Farmoor (River Thames) reservoir

The Environment Agency have also recently applied to Defra for two [drought orders](#) to protect the water environment of the Black Moss and Elslack Reservoirs.

Today, National Drought Group members agreed to:

1. Take a proactive approach to implementing drought plan interventions and other, additional schemes, over the winter period.
2. Review the projections for autumn and winter and continue scenario planning into next year
3. Continue working collaboratively across sectors to manage the impacts on water supplies, the environment and agriculture.

David Dangerfield, Environment Agency Director of Water, Land and Biodiversity and chair of the NDG, said:

When rain falls, it is easy to assume the need to act against drought and prolonged dry weather has passed – but that is not the case. Water pressures on agriculture, wildlife and the environment remain high as we head into the autumn and winter, which is why we must continue to manage water wisely.

For this year – and indeed the coming decade – significant action must be taken if we are to mitigate the impacts of climate change on our water security.

The past summer has been a clear reminder of the need to effectively prepare for weather extremes and how we make the very best use of our water resources. Our National Framework for Water Resources sets out clearly what we are doing in the face of a new normal for water and we are determined to continue driving that forward.

Attending the National Drought Group meeting for the first time since taking up her role, Trudy Harrison, Minister for Water Security, said:

I look forward to working with the Environment Agency, water companies and everyone else involved in the water industry to strengthen our water security

While essential water supplies are safe, more work must be done to ensure that we accelerate the investment needed to cut leaks, increase water efficiency and water supply and better prepare for prolonged dry weather events over the coming decade.

Water companies must put the needs of their bill payers at the

heart of their plans – which means redoubling efforts to cut leakage, accelerate delivery of projects increasing water resilience and protect our natural environment.

Water companies have a statutory duty to ensure water supplies and it is for the individual companies to ensure they remain resilient for their customers.

In drought affected areas, the public and businesses should be very mindful of the pressures on water resources and should use water wisely. But while there is an important role for individuals to sustainably manage their usage, Government expects water companies to act to reduce leakage and fix leaking pipes as quickly as possible and take timely and wider action alongside government policy.

The National Drought Group will continue to work very closely together over the coming weeks. Environment Agency Chief Executive, Sir James Bevan, will chair a further meeting of the Group on 14 October when the Water Supply sub-group will report back on progress made with planning to manage any water shortfalls into 2023.

Further action

Action is already being taken by Government, Environment Agency, water companies, environmental and angling groups and farmers to manage the impacts. The EA's ongoing actions include:

1. Managing abstraction licences to balance the needs of water companies and our natural environment;
2. Working with farmers, businesses and other abstractors to manage water availability and ensure they get the water they need to be resilient while maintaining our protection of the environment.
3. Operating water transfer schemes between different areas of the country, to make sure water gets to the areas which are worst affected by prolonged dry weather and the drought;
4. Planning with water companies and ensuring they are implementing their [drought plans](#) and applying for drought permits and drought orders where required. Every water company in England has a published drought plan available on their website;
5. Monitoring environmental conditions on key rivers to check temperature, dissolved oxygen levels and algae activity
6. Activating EA waterways drought plans to carefully manage navigations
7. Reoxygenating water and rescuing fish in distress where river flows are especially low;

Further information:

Attendees at the National Drought Group included

1. Environment Agency
2. Defra
3. AHDB
4. HTA

5. DLUHC
6. Canal and River Trust
7. Consumer Council for Water
8. Drinking Water Inspectorate
9. Energy UK
10. National Resources Wales
11. Rivers Trust
12. RSPB
13. Ofwat
14. UKHSA
15. Met Office
16. MOSL
17. Natural England
18. National Farmers Union
19. Water UK
20. Waterwise
21. Welsh Government
22. Affinity Water
23. Anglian Water
24. Northumbria Water
25. Southern Water
26. Yorkshire Water
27. SES
28. South Staffs Water
29. Thames Water
30. Severn Trent
31. South West Water
32. South East Water
33. United Utilities
34. Wessex Water
35. DCWW

Please see the map of Environment Agency areas [here](#).

The Environment Agency uses four stages to describe and manage drought conditions:

1. Prolonged dry weather
2. Drought
3. Severe Drought
4. Recovering Drought

Drought orders and drought permits

1. Water companies can apply for drought permits from the Environment Agency to help them manage public water supplies.
2. If granted, they give companies more flexibility to manage their resources during periods of drought.
3. A drought permit can last up to six months but can be amended to last up to a year.
4. Water companies will need to prove that they are making efforts to conserve water (for example by imposing a Temporary Use Ban (hosepipe

ban) before EA will grant a permit.

5. Drought orders can also be applied for by the Environment Agency or a water company. They can be used by the Environment Agency to protect the environment (an environmental drought order) or by water companies to maintain water supply.
6. Drought orders are issued/granted by the Environment Secretary.
7. Before granting an order, the Environment Secretary must be satisfied that there is an "exceptional shortage of rain", and that there is an "actual or threatened serious deficiency in water supplies" or a "serious threat to the environment due to low flows or water levels"