

National Drought Group forecasts drought may remain beyond spring 2023

Average rainfall levels over winter will still not be sufficient to avoid impending drought or drought conditions next year, the National Drought Group has forecast.

At a meeting today (14 October), chaired by Environment Agency Chief Executive Sir James Bevan, members discussed projections for a dry autumn and winter on the water, agriculture and environment sectors in 2023. Many water companies have suggested impending drought or drought conditions will remain beyond spring in some areas– notably in parts of the South West, South East, East and Yorkshire and East Midlands – if rainfall is below average.

The group, made up of senior decision-makers from the Environment Agency, government, water companies and key farming and environmental groups, also discussed actions needed over the next six months to sustain essential water supplies in preparation for spring/summer next year. This will include water companies implementing their drought plans and accelerating infrastructure plans to improve resilience of water supplies. Amongst other actions, the Environment Agency will manage water abstraction licences, take decisions on drought permits and operating its water transfer schemes.

NDG members heard that:

- Water companies expect water resources to recover to either normal or recovering conditions by spring if we receive average rainfall – but several companies forecast that some supply areas will still remain in drought or impending drought conditions.
- The lack of moisture in soils led to significant agricultural impacts and reduced water availability for farmers this year. Winter refill of farm storage reservoirs may be constrained if there is below average rainfall this winter
- Even with typical rainfall over winter, we could still see environmental impacts in 2023 due to a lag in the environmental response to the dry weather. These include impacts on fish populations, and a higher number of environmental incidents such as fish rescues being needed as a result of lower river flows.
- All sectors must plan for all scenarios, continue using water wisely and maximise access to water for all sectors and the environment.

Projections were presented by the Environment Agency on behalf of

contributing NDG members such as the water companies, the NFU and Canal and Rivers Trust.

Alongside this, the latest monthly national [water situation report](#), published by the EA today, shows that for the first time in six months, September rainfall across England as a whole reached average levels. However, due to soils remaining drier than usual, this has made little or no difference to reservoir levels and most of the country remains in drought.

River and groundwater levels remain low and reservoir stocks continue to decrease at all the reservoirs the Environment Agency reports on.

Essential water supplies remain safe, but recent rainfall has not changed the underlying drought situation caused by the prolonged dry weather of the last several months.

EA Chief Executive and NDG chair, Sir James Bevan said:

“Our lives, livelihoods and nature all depend on one thing – water. Climate change and population growth mean we need to take action now to ensure we have enough over the coming decades to manage everyday supplies, and more intense drought events.

“We have a plan to do that and delivering it will require all of us to work together – government, water companies, regulators, farmers and businesses, and each of us as individuals. The Environment Agency is determined to do its part.”

Water Minister Trudy Harrison said:

“The record-breaking temperatures, unusually low rainfall and widespread drought the country has experienced this year are a reminder that we need to adapt to ensure our water supplies are resilient and secure in future.

“The work of the National Drought Group is ensuring that we can manage down the risk of continuing drought conditions, so that the impact is less severe for all of us.”

In addition to the actions already being taken by the Environment Agency to manage the impacts of the drought, it has recently approved the following water company drought permits:

- A drought permit for South West Water to manage the abstraction of water from the Tamar Lakes in Cornwall;
- A drought permit for South East Water to manage the abstraction of water from the Ardingly (River Ouse) reservoir.

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

- Yorkshire Water has applied for drought permits to conserve water by reducing the flows out of the North West group of reservoirs;
- Thames Water has applied for a drought permit to manage the abstraction

- of water from the River Thames to help refill Farmoor reservoir;
- Thames has applied for two further drought permits to manage the abstraction of water from groundwater at Baunton and Meysey Hampton;
- Severn Trent has applied for a drought permit for reservoirs in Derwent Valley.

Ensuring long term water security

The NDG's projections place more focus than ever on the actions that must be taken now to enhance resilience to dry periods and the Environment Agency is redoubling its efforts to secure long term water security.

The National Framework for Water Resources (NFWR), launched by the Environment Agency in 2020 and agreed with the other regulators, the government and the water companies, sets out the scale of action needed to ensure resilient supplies and an improved water environment.

The NDG noted that many of the actions needed to ensure long term water security, notably the investment in new water infrastructure, will also play an important part in driving growth for the country as a whole. Members identified a set of actions to help accelerate delivery of that infrastructure and the water security it will help to ensure.

The NDG will meet again later this autumn to assess the latest position and take further action as necessary.

Further information:

Attendees at today's NDG meeting:

- AHDB
- Angling Trust
- Cabinet Office
- CLA
- Canal and River Trust
- Consumer Council for Water
- DLUHC
- Defra
- DWI
- Environment Agency
- HTA
- Met Office
- MOSL
- National Farmers Union
- Ofwat
- UKHSA
- Natural England
- Water UK
- Welsh Government
- UKWRC
- National Framework WR Steering group
- Water companies

- Affinity Water
- Anglian Water
- Bristol Water
- DCWW
- Northumbria Water
- Portsmouth Water
- SES
- Severn Trent
- Southern Water
- South East Water
- South Staffs Water
- South West Water
- Thames Water
- United Utilities
- Yorkshire Water
- Wessex Water