

News story: National Drought Group – EA Chairman’s Statement – January 2019

The National Drought Group (NDG) brings together government departments, water companies, environmental groups and others. The role of the group is to prepare for and mitigate the impacts of dry weather, to coordinate action to maintain water supplies, consider water users and protect the environment.

The National Drought Group (NDG) met on Monday 21 January, chaired by Harvey Bradshaw, Executive Director at the Environment Agency, to assess the water resource situation and actions being taken to reduce risk for summer 2019.

CURRENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

Wet weather in November and December [2018](#) brought a welcome end to six consecutive months of below average rainfall in England. This winter refill started slightly later than usual but the rain brought relief for many parts of England, with the exception of eastern England.

Despite this improvement and a slightly improved water resources situation compared to this time last year, the picture in England is not yet back to normal.

January has been dry, with just 4% of the expected (long-term average) rainfall in the first 15 days of the month, resulting in most rivers flows being very low for the time of year. There are still several reservoirs below normal in central England, groundwater in aquifers stretching from Oxford to Cambridge have also not recovered. The [Met Office 3 month outlook](#) shows a slightly higher chance of drier weather than wet during January – March. If the coming months are dry, water available for spray irrigation by farmers may be limited during the summer. If the dry weather continues it will potentially have a significant impact on wetlands and the wildlife they support including returning migratory birds due to an inadequate mix of habitats e.g. mudflat, wet grassland, open water.

The Environment Agency (EA) is taking the following action:

- Moving megalitres of water around, for example since April we have moved 27510 million litres of water in our Ely Ouse to Essex transfer and during January we plan to move a total of 7965 million litres.
- Close monitoring to assess the conditions of rivers affected by sustained low flows and prepare for potential environmental incidents.
- Supporting farmers by updating our position on flexible abstraction for farmers – due to be published in coming weeks – which will include extending the refill season into April for winter storage reservoirs.
- Reviewing guidance for water company drought plans and incorporating lessons learnt over last summer.
- Working flexibly with environmental NGOs and site managers to optimise management of wetland sites to ensure there is enough water on site or

providing advice on possible other sources of water

The National Drought Group discussed opportunities to work collaboratively on these actions, the possible implications of further dry weather and how issues from EU Exit may impact on water resources for later in the year.

THE WATER SECTOR

Extreme weather in 2018 – the ‘Beast from the East’ and summer heatwave – put pressure on the sector to test their resilience and drought plans. Following a request at the last NDG meeting, Water UK has reported on the actions the water sector has taken to protect water supplies and reduce longer term drought risk: [Managing water supplies in 2018 and preparing for 2019](#). The Environment Agency and Defra welcomed this activity and clarity.

Most water companies are in a better position than at the start of 2018 but several companies still have reservoirs and/or groundwater below average levels. The companies reassured the NDG they are taking necessary actions such as changing how they operate their sources of water, spending more on tackling leakage, promoting water efficiency and offering additional services to customers such as Southern Water’s free water pipe lagging and Thames Water’s home visits.

Water companies set out specific activities including:

- Yorkshire Water drought permits to give extra flexibility to ensure the company is prepared for the summer.
- Severn Trent Water is considering a drought permit and have been active with their customer communications.
- Anglian Water is working with the EA and the National Farmers Union (NFU) to identify opportunities to share water in the summer.
- United Utilities is embedding learning from the dry weather in 2018 into its operations.

Last year the Environment Agency issued 6 drought permits, reviewing each application to ensure the environment was not put at risk. During the meeting Defra and the Environment Agency urged water companies to act early in making any future applications as a fair assessment of the water needs of people, industry, farmers and the environment takes time – and also because teams are working to prepare for EU Exit.

AGRICULTURE

The National Farmers Union (NFU) has updated members on the dry start to the year and possible risks for the summer. Their main focus has been the East of England as the region has not shown strong signs of recovery yet. The Environment Agency’s flexible approach to abstraction for farmers will be updated shortly to include extending the refill season into April for winter storage reservoirs.

The NFU and Environment Agency have run ‘abstraction clinics’ with farmers in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire and will be arranging more in the Midlands

and other parts of East Anglia during January and February. Advice will also be sent to farmers, updated online and available from the Environment Agency customer contact centre enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk on 03708 506 506.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The NDG cautiously welcomed the recovery of water resources in many parts of England but acknowledged the ongoing dry weather may put pressure on farmers and the environment in the spring.

Water companies were positive that even if the dry weather continues over the coming months, they would not need to introduce any restrictions this summer. Water companies reassured the group that they are not being complacent – they continue to tackle leakage, review their operations and communicate with customers.

In the short to medium term, farmers and the environment face the biggest risks and those involved need to take action now to prepare for what could be a difficult summer.

Through the NDG, members will need to work together to act early and mitigate these risks, the potential challenges from a cold snap and the changes from EU Exit. We encourage sharing and trading of water as a number of members did in 2018.

The NDG will meet again in March 2019.