

News story: National Drought Group – EA Chief Executive’s Statement

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

The NDG met on Tuesday 4 June, chaired by Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, to assess the latest water resource situation and actions being taken to reduce the risk of drought this summer.

Current situation

After the heatwave last year and a dry winter, this spring again saw lower than average rainfall. Low rainfall in April and May, particularly in the East of England, has seen some river flows decline to lower than normal for the time of year. In the south and east, rainfall has not replenished groundwater stores, with levels now declining. While there is no threat to public water supply, these conditions are putting particular pressure on the environment and agriculture. It will be some time before conditions can return to normal. Rainfall over the next few weeks will not be sufficient.

Position of the water companies

It is the responsibility of the water companies to maintain supplies. Despite the lack of full recovery in the water resources position over winter, most water companies have good reservoir storage for the summer.

The water companies confirmed they do not expect to need to bring in household water restrictions this summer (“hosepipe bans”) unless the next few months are exceptionally dry. One or two companies may need to apply for drought permits later this year, allowing them to take more water than usual from rivers or boreholes. While the current situation is manageable and there is no present threat to public water supplies, a third dry winter in 2019/20 would cause significant problems for summer 2020.

The water companies set out the actions they are taking to ensure maintenance of supply over the coming months, including:

- refilling their reservoirs where possible.
- taking action to find and reduce leaks.
- making water transfers around their networks and between companies to meet demand and rest some sources.
- taking forward a range of other work to increase the resilience of their networks, including bringing unused sources online and testing water standards.
- seeking to minimise the risk of unplanned outages and infrastructure failure by reviewing their assets and tackling known issues such as

algal growth.

- working with farmers locally to identify ways to sustain and share water supplies
- ensuring that all potential sites are application-ready for drought permits.
- continuing to promote water efficiency and metering, including widening campaigns to target specific zones or groups of customers.

The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency:

- has permitted temporary flexible abstraction to allow rapid access to water for abstractors within environmental limits. During 2018, it received 150 requests to flex of which two-thirds were agreed. In 2019, so far the EA has received 94 requests of which 90% have been approved.
- has extended the licence trading map from East Anglia to Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, East Midlands and West Midlands, to help abstractors look for opportunities to potentially access other abstractors' unused water
- is reviewing the groundwater and surface water position to consider if more water could be made available during peak demands – by the means of flexible abstraction and rapid trading – wherever this can be done without damaging the environment and ensuring lawful abstraction is maintained.
- is ensuring that the water transfer schemes it owns and operates which support public water supply, such as the Ely Ouse Essex Transfer Scheme are operating, or are ready to operate when needed.
- is operating compensatory pumping schemes to support low river flows and protect the environment, such as the Slea augmentation scheme in Lincolnshire.
- has taken proactive action to protect wildlife and the environment, for example by installing aerators on the Ouse washes earlier than normal to enhance oxygen levels to protect fish, and by loaning aerators and dissolved oxygen meters to angling clubs and fisheries across East Anglia.
- is continuing its enforcement activity to ensure abstractors comply with their licences to help minimise the impact on the environment.

Agriculture

Low rainfall this winter and spring is causing increasing concern for water resource availability, both in surface water and groundwater abstraction for the forthcoming irrigation season, particularly in the east of England.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) and farmers are working closely with the EA, Internal Drainage Boards, water companies and Defra to manage the situation and sustain farming production, including through water trading and flexible abstractions that are now in place in some catchments. Working with the NFU and CLA the EA has held five advice sessions for farmers since January 2019.

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) have produced

advice for farmers on coping with drought and securing resilient water supplies.

Environment

We have seen some environmental issues including fish incidents, algae bloom and wildfires, comparatively early this year. Groundwater chalk streams remain vulnerable if dry weather continues and is exacerbated by high temperatures.

The group noted growing concern over the potential impacts of prolonged dry weather on the environment and the cumulative effect from last year. Another dry summer could cause significant and widespread impacts on the environment.

Navigation

The Environment Agency and Canal and Rivers Trust are working together to advise boaters of best practice to help conserve water in the lock systems and asking them to consider sharing locks where possible – as they always do in summer.

Advice to the public

There is enough water for all if water resources are managed properly. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that this happens. At present the average person in the UK uses 140 litres of water a day: long term water security will require all of us to reduce that figure.

The NDG reaffirmed its core message to the public: please use water wisely.

Conclusions and next steps

The Environment Agency, water companies and others agreed to sustain their efforts to ensure that water users and the environment continue to get the water they need, and to further strengthen their collaboration to this end. They agreed to stay in close touch at national and local level, and that the NDG would meet again in late July to assess the latest situation and take any further necessary measures.