

Press release: Environment Agency supports water restrictions in the North West

The Environment Agency supports United Utilities plans for water restrictions across the North West to help reduce demand for water during this period of prolonged dry weather and protect the environment as well as public water supplies.

Although the region has seen some periods of rainfall in localised areas, over two very dry months, we have seen a rapid decline in reservoir levels in the North West and we have started to see significant impacts on the local environment.

The Environment Agency uses regulatory powers to manage water availability to maintain essential supplies for people and the environment and have been responding to impacts on the environment due to the dry weather over the last few months. Environment Agency teams have stepped up incident response as well as regulation of those abstracting water to ensure the environment is protected.

Environment Agency teams respond 24/7 to environmental incidents to protect people and the environment and have received a sharp increase in reports of environmental incidents in the North West, with 25 per cent of July's estimated reports received in just the first three days.

Incidents can either be caused or exacerbated by the hot, dry conditions – such as fish in distress, or fish caught in pools due to flow flows, reports of Blue-Green algae, or moorland fires. Teams have been carrying out fish rescues, including one in Borrowdale, Cumbria, on Saturday and attending fish kill incidents exacerbated by dry conditions, such as that at Pigs Lee Brook, Bury, Greater Manchester, on Friday.

Environment Agency teams are meeting with affected groups including farmers to provide practical advice about conserving water and planning for prolonged dry weather. We have carried out abstraction licence checks, visited critical spray irrigators, carried out water abstraction visits, advised businesses and farmers on water usage, and inspected rivers where the flows are lowest.

Hydropower turbines have been checked for compliance including fish-pass and weir flows, and we have been on site monitoring air quality in response to the Saddleworth moorland fires. Teams are monitoring for environmental impacts across the region, and taking action to protect the environment.

Jim Ratcliffe, Environment Agency Drought Manager, said:

United Utilities plans for a temporary usage ban is a responsible measure to help preserve public water supplies and protect the

environment given the impacts we are seeing from the dry weather.

Household water restrictions such as those proposed by United Utilities can reduce the demand for water by up to 10% – which is significantly more than changes to abstraction permits, or using other sources. This will help us balance the need of people through public water supplies, whilst protecting the sensitive natural environment.

Each week, our hydrology experts monitor river flows and groundwater to see how much water there is and plan accordingly. Just like in a flood scenario, we have put robust and well tested plans in place during this period of dry weather, ensuring our demand for water is managed in the best possible way.

Water is a precious resource and we always advise that businesses, farmers and householders use water wisely – especially during a period of dry weather – and to follow the advice of their water company. We all need to increase the amount of water we save to protect our natural environment and drinking water supplies.

As always, if people see any environmental impacts due to dry weather, such as fish in distress, please report it to the Environment Agency incident line on 0800 80 70 60 so we can investigate and take action.

The Environment Agency continues to work with United Utilities to ensure that, at all times, we make the best use of the water available and minimise any potential impacts to people, the environment and tourism should the dry weather continue.

Cumbria's unique geography makes it sensitive to high and low rainfall and the Environment Agency works with communities throughout the year to manage this.

During dry spells it's not unusual for some rivers and lakes in the North West to deplete quickly, during even short periods of low rainfall, and they tend to recover quickly when the rain returns.

If we have intense rainfall on dry or compacted ground it runs off rapidly making river levels rise rapidly. This can cause localised flooding so it is possible to have floods during prolonged dry periods.