

# News story: National Drought Group – Chairman's Statement – September 2018

The National Drought Group (NDG), chaired by Environment Agency Chief Executive Sir James Bevan, brings together government departments, water companies, environmental groups and others to coordinate action to maintain water supplies and manage the other risks associated with drought.

The NDG convened on Thursday 20 September to assess the present situation and review the action being taken to reduce the risk of drought in 2019.

## CURRENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS:

The National Drought Group noted that despite recent rainfall and cooler weather, a significant number of reservoirs in the area around Manchester, Sheffield and Stoke-on-Trent are very low. United Utilities, Yorkshire Water and Severn Trent Water are all taking action to reduce water taken from these sources. It is unlikely that restrictions on customers will be used this autumn.

Recent heavy rainfall across Cumbria has improved the water resources situation for some reservoirs operated by United Utilities. However, there is continuing localised drought risk in some areas of the Pennines, Yorkshire, Manchester, Sheffield, Stoke and parts of central England.

Water companies need higher-than-average rainfall over the next few months to ensure good water supplies next spring and summer, and avoid the risk of water restrictions then.

## ACTION TO BE TAKEN:

The water companies set out the action they will be taking to meet this challenge. This includes putting more resources into efforts to reduce leakage, seeking to capture and store as much water as possible going into the autumn, exploring the opportunities for water transfers between companies, improving and implementing their drought plans and other operational contingency measures. The action also covers preparing applications for drought permits should these prove necessary in the coming months, and continuing to communicate with customers the latest water resources position and encouraging their customers to use water wisely, including by encouraging moves to more metering.

The Environment Agency confirmed that it will sustain its enhanced activity to seek to ensure water users and the environment get the water they need and:

- Ensure they are responding quickly to emergencies
- Work with the water companies to ensure they are following their drought plans and implementing all agreed actions in a timely way
- Work proactively with farmers and other water users who abstract water

under licence from the Environment Agency to seek to ensure they get the water they need whilst sustaining environmental needs

- Continue to actively monitor the weather, water situation and the environment. Manage down demand and protect the environment, using regulatory powers as necessary
- Assist the Canal and Rivers Trust with water supplies for canal networks to avoid impacts to those who use canals for homes
- continue to operate its own water transfer schemes where necessary to maintain river flows for water supply and the environment
- Communicate with those who use the environment to help identify potential impacts as quickly as possible
- Continue to respond to drought-related and other environmental incidents

The Environment Agency is working actively with the water companies and others to balance the needs of the public, industry and farmers, and the environment; and to ensure long-term water resilience. Following the National Drought Group, Sir James Bevan will chair the first steering group meeting of the water national water resources framework meeting, which will look at long-term pressures facing all sectors, and how to express these to ensure greater water resilience in the future.

Other NDG members set out the action they will be taking to preserve water supplies, sustain economic and leisure activity and protect as far as possible the environment, rivers, lakes and wildlife.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The NDG confirmed that there is no threat to essential water supplies. But a drier than average winter would bring the risk of restrictions on water company customers. It would also prove another challenging summer for farmers next year and cause further environmental impacts across the country. NDG members agreed to continue to work together to manage down these risks in the short to medium term and to balance the needs of people, the economy and the environment; and to work collaboratively to enhance the country's long-term resilience to drought and water shortages.

The NDG will meet again on 19 November to take stock and agree any further necessary measures going into winter.

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## [Press release: Grass greener, but rain needed to reduce drought-risk for 2019](#)

- National Drought Group agrees action to reduce risk of drought in 2019
- More than 300 dry-weather environmental incidents this summer
- Water restrictions likely in spring 2019 if winter rainfall is below average.

The National Drought Group (NDG) met today (20 September) to assess the latest situation and agree actions needed to reduce the risk of water restrictions and protect the environment next year.

Members of the NDG, organisations affected by and responding to the risk of drought, heard that a number of water companies still have very low reservoir levels. The current environmental situation is fragile and dependent on good rainfall over the autumn and winter period.

The dry summer had a significant impact on water supplies, agriculture, the environment and wildlife, with the Environment Agency responding to 314 dry weather related incidents over summer – more than 3 times the usual amount.

Despite the recent rainfall, which has provided respite to rivers, wildlife and people's lawns around the country, the water resources situation has not yet returned to normal. At the end of August, overall reservoir stocks were at 65 per cent. The NDG heard today that if winter rainfall is below average, water restrictions on water company customers are likely in spring 2019.

Following the dry summer, Sir James Bevan, Environment Agency Chief Executive, invited water company representatives back to the NDG to explain their plans to protect water supplies and the environment. Today, they outlined a range of steps to reduce the risk of restrictions and ensure good water supplies into next year. Water companies are working to reduce leakage, capture and store as much water as possible over winter, identifying new water sources, setting up water transfers between companies and other operational contingency measures.

The summer has been tough on farmers. The Environment Agency responded quickly providing help and assistance with speedy decisions on allowing more water to farmers through August by approving 88 changes to licences to help farmers get more water.

Efforts to conserve water and recent rain has helped to stabilise water levels, easing pressure on the environment and agricultural sector. But the full impact of the summer heatwave is yet to be felt, with a delay on damage to some species and crops. With very dry soils, especially in the south east of England, there may be a delay refilling groundwater aquifers and reservoirs over the coming months. A delay in recharge may mean we start spring 2019 with below average groundwater levels, increasing the risk of drought in the east and south east of England next summer.

Sir James Bevan, Environment Agency Chief Executive, who chaired the NDG meeting, reminding members that early action and proper planning will reduce the likelihood, or extent, of drought measures next year. He said:

Ensuring sufficient water for the public, the economy and the environment is one of biggest challenges we face as a country. The Environment Agency will continue to work actively with the water companies and other water users to seek to ensure that.

But this is not just a matter for the organisations at National Drought Group. We all use water, and everyone has a role to play in ensuring we continue to have reliable access to it, so we encourage everyone to please use water wisely.

Notes to Editors

1. The full statement from NDG Chair and Environment Agency Chief Executive Sir James Bevan is available on request and will be on GOV.UK today.

## 2. List of attendees at this meeting:

Affinity Water; Anglian Water; Bristol Water; Cabinet Office; Canal and River Trust; Consumer Council for Water; Defra; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Drinking Water Inspectorate; Energy UK; Environment Agency; Met Office; National Farmers Union; Natural England; Northumbrian Water; Essex and Suffolk Water; Ofwat; Portsmouth Water; Public Health England; RSPB; SES Water; Severn Trent Water; South East Water; South Staffs Water; South West Water; Southern Water; Thames Water; United Utilities; Water Scan; Water UK; Wessex Water; and Yorkshire Water.

Ends.

For media enquiries, please call:

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## **First phase of university transformation plan announced**

Proposals include new £35m facility in Dumfries & Galloway in SRUC transformation into Scotland's new rural university by 2022.