

National Drought Group – July 2020 statement

The National Drought Group, chaired by Environment Agency (EA) Executive Director Harvey Bradshaw, met on Monday 13 July 2020 to assess water resources after the driest spring on record. The meeting also focused on the effectiveness of collective action taken across the sector during this period and how to maintain the impetus on preparing for future drought.

The National Drought Group (NDG) in England brings together government departments, water companies, environmental groups and others by coordinating drought action to maintain water supplies and protect the environment.

The Environment Agency and all parts of the water sector have been working together throughout the recent episodes of dry weather to ensure water resources are managed effectively. While the current wet weather has provided some respite, we are keen to take all the action needed to prepare for the future.

It's clear that periods of extended high rainfall and extended low rainfall are becoming more common. We want to ensure that water is collected when available, used efficiently and shared with effective long term plans in place.

The long term risk that demand for water in some parts of England will outstrip supply remains ever-present. The Environment Agency's recently published National Framework for Water Resources sets out the challenges all sectors face for future water management. We expect water companies and other sectors such as agriculture to work together to improve resilience against future extremes of weather.

Returning to more normal business after the Coronavirus pandemic won't be enough to address the climate emergency and tackling climate change must become a default position for everyone. Last week (9 July) we launched our EA2025 plan, which sets out how we will create climate resilient places and infrastructure by ensuring the nation is prepared for flooding, coastal change and drought over the next five years.

While water companies need to make changes, as set out in our National Framework for Water Resources, we all have a responsibility to protect our water resources for future generations. We want to meet the objectives set out in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan to ensure we pass on an improved environment for our children and grandchildren.

Current situation

Exceptionally dry weather this spring coupled with very high demand associated with "lockdown" led to a rapid fall in river flows and reservoir levels across northern and western England in particular. June rainfall has

offered some relief with river flows and reservoir levels improving in all areas compared to the end of May. Drought risks are now far lower but surface water dependent catchments still remain less resilient to further hot, dry weather. This dry period follows an exceptionally wet winter with widespread flooding; but was preceded by periods of exceptionally dry weather and drought across parts of the east and south of England over the last three years.

Position of the water companies

Water companies have enough water for the rest of the summer following the recent wet weather. Some water companies may experience distribution issues if very hot weather returns and leads to very high demand but there is enough water to make Temporary Use (hosepipe) Bans very unlikely this summer. With a return to hot and dry weather through into autumn there is a low risk some companies may need to take action this winter to safeguard supplies for next summer. Today the water industry has launched a public awareness campaign with Waterwise to help all of us use water as efficiently as possible.

Environment

After three years of prolonged dry weather the recent rainfall has provided some respite for the environment, but overall it is still recovering from concurrent episodes of low rainfall over the last three years. There is a risk of high numbers of environmental incidents associated with low flows, fish, algal blooms and wild fire if the weather becomes warm and dry. Sudden rainfall events during an otherwise dry period can cause pollution events and kill fish. Throughout the summer the Environment Agency will continue to report and respond to incidents to reduce environmental harm. We welcome the support of local environmental groups in working with us to assess the environmental conditions and promote water conservation

The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency is:

- Carrying out drought monitoring and incident response through the summer, prioritising sites impacted by both the recent dry weather and those recovering following the 2018-19 drought event.
- Working closely with all water companies to ensure their drought plans are up to date and activated if necessary.
- Following its own drought plans to manage our response to drought and minimise unnecessary impacts on the environment
- Engaging with agriculture and horticulture abstractors and representative groups to keep them informed of the situation. We are working with farmers, businesses and other abstractors to ensure they get the water they need to be resilient, while also protecting the environment. We have updated our guidance to help farmers continue to abstract during dry weather this summer.
- Driving activity to protect our water resources for future generations through our National Framework for Water Resources. The framework will help reduce demand, set strategic direction to halve leakage rates,

develop new supplies, move water to where it's needed and reduce the need for drought measures that can harm the environment. All of this is designed to increase resilience and maintain stable supplies for families and businesses into the future

- Delivering river and habitat restoration projects with our partners to make them more resilient to extreme weather

Advice to the public

While the immediate pressure on water resources has lessened to a degree, we must still be mindful of how we use water. Now is a great time to think about the future and how you can prepare when dry weather returns.

You can install a water butt to capture rainwater so you have additional stores when the sun comes out. Avoid using a hose on your garden and fit a trigger control if you need to.

Today is the Waterwise Annual Conference and the launch of 'Water's worth saving', a new campaign with Water UK to help customers understand the need to save water and simple steps they can take to reduce water use.

If you are an angler, walker, boater or just enjoying the environment, please be our eyes and ears when it comes to spotting potential problems in our rivers, such as fish gasping at the surface or large algal blooms. Report these to the Environment Agency on 0800 807060.

Conclusions and next steps

The NDG reflected on the threat of future drought events under climate change projections and pledged to maintain momentum around drought planning across the sector by making this the focus of a multi-sector meeting later in the year. It committed to work together to ensure preparation is done on a strategic basis to ensure we are ready and resilient. While the need to meet regularly throughout the summer has lessened, the group reiterated the need to respond quickly to emerging situations in less resilient catchments. The groups agreed to hold a lessons learned meeting in Autumn.