

National Drought Group – June 2020 statement

The National Drought Group, chaired by Environment Agency (EA) Executive Director Harvey Bradshaw, met on Friday 5 June 2020 to review the latest situation and ensure that all parts of the water sector are pulling together to manage the impact of dry weather and increased water demand.

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

The Environment Agency is striving to limit the damage of drought and ensure water supplies are sustainable even during the droughts forecasted by the most extreme future climate change scenarios. Evidence shows that periods of [extended high rainfall](#) and [extended low rainfall](#) are becoming more common. This is backed up by [recent Met Office data](#) indicating that some parts of England have seen record-breaking levels of sun during May. This all points to the need for further public awareness about using water efficiently to protect our precious natural environment, not only now but in the coming years and decades.

We know that if we don't take action now many areas of England will face water shortages by 2050. This is why we have introduced our [National Framework for Water Resources](#), setting out what is required to preserve our water supplies and protect the environment for future generations.

Current situation

Following the extremely wet winter which replenished depleted groundwater aquifers, a period of prolonged hot and dry weather has rapidly reduced river flows and dried out soils. This is particularly the case in areas such as north-west England which are more reliant on surface water supplies, making them naturally less resilient to exceptionally low rainfall. We are monitoring the situation closely and working with water companies to encourage the public to make small changes to use less water while also following government guidance around handwashing.

Position of the water companies

Almost all water companies have seen elevated demand due to both the recent hot, dry weather and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In some cases this has created a challenge for companies to treat and distribute enough water to meet demand. This is expected to continue as more people stay at home over the summer compared to previous years. Water companies will need to continue to focus their efforts on driving down water demand, driving down leakage and maximising their networks. They will continue to work with

agriculture and other sectors to share the water that is available.

The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency is:

- Actively planning to safely carry out environmental monitoring and incident response through the summer, prioritising sites impacted by both the current dry weather and those recovering following the 2018-19 period of prolonged dry weather
- Working closely with all water companies throughout the year to ensure their drought plans are up to date and activated as needed
- Following its own drought plans to manage our response to the dry weather and minimise unnecessary impacts on the environment
- Carrying out fish rescues where fish are in distress due to low flows. Last month we carried out fish rescues on the River Teme and River Redlake in Shropshire to prevent or reduce the loss of species
- Issuing regulatory guidance for public water supply and non-public water abstraction around the issue of coronavirus. This will take account of the impact of the virus on water abstraction activity to ensure it can continue to comply with critical regulatory requirements and minimise unnecessary environmental damage
- Engaging with agriculture and horticulture abstractors and representative groups to keep them informed of the situation. We have updated our [irrigation prospects report](#) and are working with farmers, businesses and other abstractors to ensure they get the water they need to be resilient, while also protecting the environment
- 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 with partners river and habitat restoration projects making them more resilient to extreme weather Agriculture

Hands off flow conditions are being reached on some agriculture abstraction licences and more of these are likely to be triggered with continued dry weather. A hands off flow condition allows us to instruct the abstractor to reduce or cease abstraction to help protect river flows and the biodiversity they sustain.

There may also be animal health and welfare issues if livestock drinking water is not available due to streams drying up or disruption to mains supplies. The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) has produced guidance for farmers on what to do if the water supply for their livestock is at risk. It is available on the [AHDB website](#).

Environment

Today is World Environment day and we celebrate the crucial role water plays in maintaining the health of our natural environment. Throughout the summer we will continue to report and respond to incidents and watch closely for signs of environmental harm. We also recognise that after three years of prolonged dry weather the winter rainfall has provided a fragile recovery. In our chalk streams, the groundwater recharge has enabled flows to return and a positive potential buffer for drier months ahead, but there are still hotspots where rivers are dry and receding. In surface water-dominated catchments in the north and south west, current low flows present an environmental risk.

Advice to the public

As today is World Environment Day we urge everyone to think about where your water comes from and how you can use it more efficiently. Water keeps our local rivers, reservoirs, lakes, and taps flowing. It provides life to nature as well as to ourselves and livelihoods to farmers.

This is critical not only in the next few weeks and months but also the coming years and decades to ensure we have the necessary water resources to continue to sustain wildlife and habitats.

We can all do our bit:

While we enjoy the hot and sunny days please consider your water use:

- Now is a great time to install a water butt to capture the rain when it returns. Plants prefer rainwater to mains tap water
- Instead of using a hose wash the car using a bucket and sponge
- Unless you have laid new turf, grass doesn't need watering so save some money and help the environment by turning off your garden sprinkler
- We care for our plants in the garden, so give them what they need using a watering can rather than a hose. If you do use a hose, then fit a trigger control so you are only using it when you need to. Remember a constantly-running hose uses 1,000 litres in one hour.
- If you have used a paddling pool, use a bucket to reuse the water on your shrubs and flowers rather than just pouring it onto your lawn.
- Go to the [Waterwise website](#) for further advice on water efficiency measures.

Your environment needs your help! Report environmental incidents to the Environment Agency to ensure that we can protect our water resources for future generations.

While we ask people to use water wisely, they should [follow current NHS advice on helping to stop the spread of coronavirus](#) by washing your hands.

Conclusions and next steps

The NDG reviewed the lessons from the previous three years of drought conditions and made a commitment across the sector to work together to ensure that there is enough water for the public, industry and agriculture. It also pledged to respond quickly to emerging situations and agreed to meet throughout the summer to monitor further developments.