

24 February 2012

Current situation and outlook

On Monday 20 February, the Environment Secretary announced that the South East of England has officially moved into drought status. This is due to the combination of persistent dry weather and the continuing decline in groundwater levels and river flows and increasing the risk to public water supplies, agriculture and the environment. As a result Hampshire, West Sussex, East Sussex, Kent, Surrey, London, Berkshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and the east of Gloucestershire are now in drought.

Most of East Anglia has been in drought since June 2011 with the coastal parts at high risk of drought. Areas of central and south west England as well as south east Yorkshire also continue to be affected by dry weather. Groundwater levels are very low in parts of the west of England (Wessex). With little of the winter recharge period left for significant recovery of groundwater the risk of drought in the spring and summer in these areas is high.

The south and east of England continue to experience dry weather. Soil moisture deficits have increased and river flows decreased in these areas. The east of England has received 27 percent of the February long term average to date and soil moisture deficits are 51mm. For more detailed information (including maps and graphs) on current rainfall levels, soil moisture deficits, river flows, groundwater levels and reservoir stocks, please see our latest [weekly water situation report](#).

Helen Vale, National Drought Co-ordinator, said: "With the south east of England moving formally to drought this week and many parts of England at high risk it's more important than ever that we all use water wisely. The Environment Agency must balance the water needs of people, businesses and the environment. We are working with businesses, farmers and water companies to plan ahead to meet the challenges of a continued drought."

Some of the actions we're taking

- At the drought summit on 20 February called by the Environment Secretary, the Environment Agency's Chief Executive, Paul Leinster, presented a detailed analysis of the current situation and outlined the prospects for spring and summer 2012. A number of actions were agreed at the meeting which we will be taking forward with Defra and our partners.
- We have provided the media with additional information regarding the announcement of the south east moving to drought status.
- The new drought prospects report will be released at the beginning of March and will look forwards to the spring, summer and beginning of autumn.
- We continue to work with water companies and abstractors to implement actions.
- We are discussing the possibility of voluntary and formal restrictions with the NFU and abstractor groups in eastern England.

Environmental impact

Few new environmental incidents have been reported recently, however there have been reports of isolated incidents. We are still receiving reports in the east of England that domestic boreholes are drying up. We are discussing this issue with Local Authorities, Local Resilience Forums and abstractors.

On the River Meon in Hampshire, we have responded to fish kills and distressed fish thought to be due to low flows. Thirty mature sea trout and six salmon have been reported dead.

British Waterways has lowered the level on the Grand Union Canal (Tring Summit) by around 300-400mm to conserve water, closing it to through passage. Levels were lowered on 11 January 2012 until further notice. There are no other current restrictions in place due to drought.

Public water supply

Reservoir stocks have increased at most sites this week, but some remain exceptionally low for the time of year including Ardingly and Bewl reservoirs.

The drought order for South East Water to refill Ardingly reservoir is still not in use as the flows in the River Ouse are higher than those that would trigger use of the order. However, there is still a concern as the reservoir is only at 42% capacity. We continue to work with South East Water on its environmental monitoring, mitigation and remediation plan.

Southern Water has applied for a drought permit to help refill Bewl reservoir (currently at 42% capacity). The permit would allow the Minimum Residual Flow on the Medway to be reduced until the end of March. We believe this is an appropriate response to increase water levels in the reservoir and we are reviewing the details before making a decision.

We are in pre-application discussions with Sutton and East Surrey Water for a drought permit to extend its licensed abstraction from the River Eden to Bough Beech Reservoir, which normally stops at the end of April.

Water companies across the whole of the South East and parts of Anglian have said that whilst they are not running out of water they are having to put in place measures from their drought plans and may need to impose restrictions on customer use in the coming weeks.

Agriculture

Abstraction licence restrictions remain in place in our Midlands region (46), our Anglian region (130) and our South East region (187). The number of licences restricted changes on a weekly basis depending on rainfall.

There are no licences subject to voluntary restrictions or formal Section 57 restrictions, although we are discussing this with abstractor groups and the NFU in eastern England.

We meet with the NFU and local farmers on a regular basis and continue to adapt a flexible approach as far as possible.