

24 March 2005

Water Resources Outlook – How Serious Is It?

Jerry England, Thames Water's Chief Operating Officer, answers some key questions on the water resources outlook for the summer.

How dry has it really been?

The situation is serious. Since November the Thames Water region has received less than half the rainfall we would expect in an average year, making it the third driest winter since records began over 120 years ago.

Boreholes in our area, which draw water from deep underground, are at roughly half their normal levels for this time of year. River flows are also much lower than normal.

Our reservoirs are currently virtually full, but levels will fall rapidly unless we get significant rainfall soon. We need the rainfall to boost river flows and enable us to keep reservoir levels healthy throughout the spring and summer.

We are, of course, stepping up our efforts to maintain supplies, but we do need to ask our customers to help us by doing what they can to save water.

The environment is a shared responsibility - we all have a role to play in conserving water.

It's worth remembering too that the London area is drier than most people think – per head of population it gets less rainfall than Madrid and Istanbul.

In the Thames Water region we already use 55 per cent of effective rainfall - that is rainfall minus evaporation - for public supply, compared to just eight per cent in Wales.

When do you expect to have to introduce restrictions on water use, such as hosepipe or sprinkler bans?

We know it's our job to provide customers with the water they need.

For the last 15 years we have been able to provide this service without any restrictions, such as hosepipe bans.

We are proud of that record and aim to maintain it this summer. But the situation this year means that we cannot rule out the possibility of introducing restrictions at some stage.

Much depends on exactly how much rain we get and the exact level of demand for water, which is why we are making customers aware of the situation now.

What can customers do to save water?

There are lots of simple things that we can all do to help conserve supplies. They may seem like small steps, but if we all act together they can collectively make a big difference.

For example:

- Use a bucket instead of a hose while washing the car.
- Use a watering can instead of a sprinkler in the garden. A sprinkler uses as much in an hour as one person uses in a whole week.
- Ensure you have a full load in your dishwasher or washing machine before use.
- Have a short shower instead of a bath – but be careful, power showers can use very large amounts of water.
- Even turning off the tap while brushing your teeth saves an average of six litres, enough to flush the toilet.

What is Thames Water doing to stem leakage?

Amongst our many responsibilities, reducing leakage remains our biggest priority – we know we have more work to do. It's a key challenge for us given that a third of the network in London is more than 150 years old.

We are currently channelling record levels of resources into finding and fixing leaks - £90m a year.

On top of this, we are pushing ahead with our work to replace Victorian water mains in London, currently in places such as Hornsey, Whitechapel and Notting Hill. It's part of an ambitious investment programme recently approved by our regulator Ofwat, which will see us replace over 850 miles of old pipes in London, where shifting, corrosive soils and heavy 24-hour traffic add to the huge challenge we face in stemming leakage.

What else is Thames Water doing to ensure supplies to customers are maintained in the years ahead?

An important scheme that we have already put in place has enabled us to store an emergency supply of water in the chalk rock beneath Enfield and Haringey, as a contingency for prolonged dry periods. We may need to use this reserve this summer if rainfall levels do not increase soon.

We are also developing brand new water sources. For instance, we will soon be opening a new water treatment works in east London to treat supplies from boreholes created during the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link.

For the longer term planning approval is currently pending for London's first desalination plant. This would convert salty water from the tidal Thames in Newham into water for public supply.

If approved, the plant would be able to deliver up to 150 million litres of water a day, enough to supply 900,000 customers. The target date to have the works up and running is 2007.

Even further ahead we are developing plans for a major new reservoir in Oxfordshire, which we believe will be needed to maintain supplies to customers right across our region.

Given the expected impacts of climate change and the huge population growth forecast for our region, the reservoir proposal and the desalination plant are needed as well as, not instead of, leakage reduction work and campaigns to promote water efficiency.

As an indication of the challenge we face, London alone is set to have 800,000 more residents by 2016, the equivalent of the current population of Leeds moving to the capital.

What is Thames Water doing to promote water efficiency?

Promoting water efficiency is an ongoing feature of our strategy for managing water resources. Alongside our water wise website www.thameswateruk.co.uk/waterwise and long-established work with schools, other initiatives include working with Reading Football Club to promote water efficiency via adverts in match day programmes and on the Madejski Stadium's electronic scoreboard.

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