

23 June 2020

## Prolonged Dry Weather Briefing

### Purpose of this briefing

To explain that today we announce the move into a period of Prolonged Dry Weather ('developing drought') in the Cam & Ely Ouse river catchment, to outline what this means for the community, and what actions we are taking to minimise damage to the environment.

### Background

Following the dry weather and drought in 2018/19 East Anglia has remained in a situation we refer to as 'recovering drought'. This means that winter rainfall was sufficient to begin effectively recharging ground water aquifers, with total volumes at 144% above the long-term average (LTA) through the 2019/20 winter period.

But the situation has been drying out fast in recent months. From March to May 2020 we saw just 40% of LTA so that river flows and groundwater levels are declining in an increasing number of our catchments.

#### Key facts:

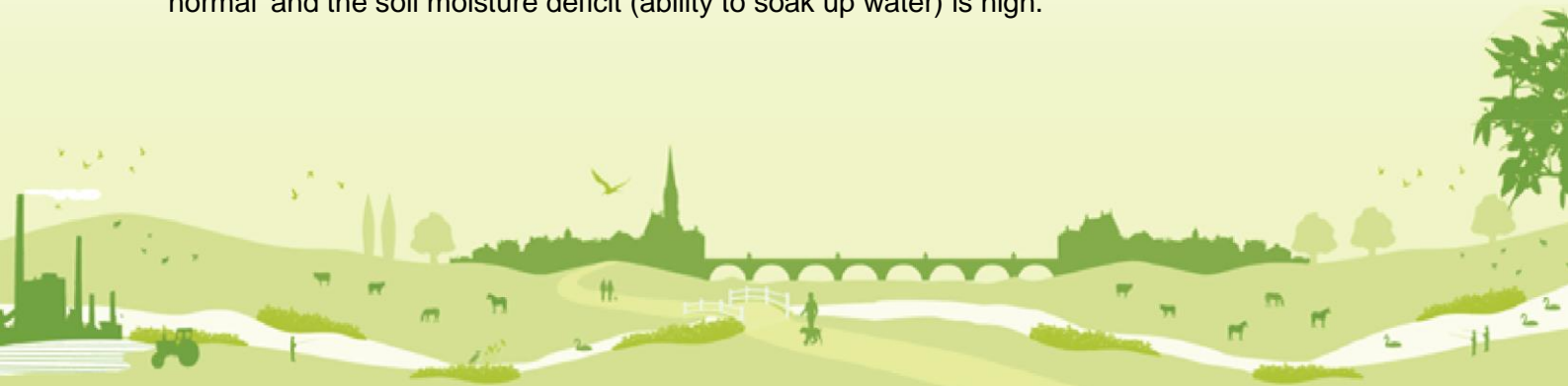
- Whilst February 2020 was the wettest on record, May 2020 has been the driest ever recorded.
- March to May 2020 has been the fourth driest period since records began in 1892.
- In the Cam & Ely Ouse catchment, May 2020 rainfall was between just 5.5% and 9.5% of the long-term average (LTA). June so far has seen around 40% of LTA.

### Prolonged Dry Weather status for the Cam & Ely Ouse

The Cam & Ely Ouse is the first catchment in the East Anglia area to move to this status, and the Environment Agency will continue to review the amount of water that can be abstracted in the catchment.

The drought team in East Anglia have been monitoring the situation and reviewing the range of dry weather indicators, including groundwater levels, surface water flows and impacts on the environment.

In the Cam and Ely Ouse surface water flows and some groundwater levels are 'below normal' and the soil moisture deficit (ability to soak up water) is high.



## Dry Weather Situation in other parts of East Anglia

In Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk the extremely dry spring has seen a rapid decline in groundwater levels and early season river flows. Early June rainfall has been below normal in the south and a little above normal in Norfolk. Generally most rivers have shown a small sustained recovery and will benefit from this for the next few weeks. We have seen indications of a transient demand for water from the agricultural sector, due to a late sowing season and poor crop establishment in the dry spring.

If summer rainfall continues to be significantly below average there remains a low risk that we may need to impose formal restrictions on some of our water abstraction customers, and may also move into Prolonged Dry Weather status in some other Suffolk and Essex catchments.

In Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Milton Keynes, parts of Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Hertfordshire we are monitoring similar reducing surface water flows and groundwater levels. The early June rainfall has broadly been lower in the west and increasing towards the east, but all rivers have seen some short term benefit. Our North West Norfolk catchment remains resilient, and the level based systems in Cambridgeshire are being closely managed with partners from the Internal Drainage Boards. We are closely monitoring the situation in the Upper and Bedford Ouse catchment, including the River Tove and other tributaries, where there is a higher risk of also moving into Prolonged Dry Weather status in the coming weeks.

## Working with water companies

We are liaising with water companies to share information on water availability, operational activities and to understand any emerging concerns.

Importantly, the situation will not be severe enough to affect public water supply. The water companies who operate and supply water in this area have assured us that for this summer (2020), water will be available without restrictions. This in part is due to their large storage reservoirs that have been slowly filling over the winter in readiness for drier conditions in the summer. However, they are keen to emphasise their own messages regarding the careful and efficient use of water, and to make sustainable water savings, not just now but also on an ongoing basis.

## Working with abstractors

We are working with farmers, businesses and other abstractors to manage water availability and ensure that as far as possible they get the water they need to be resilient while maintaining our protection of the environment.

Abstraction licence holders in the most affected areas are likely to receive notice to restrict the amount of water they take as described in their licence conditions. This may take the form of taking reduced quantities or only abstracting at particular times, depending on local circumstances. We are encouraging farmers to check their abstraction licenses to make sure they are fit for purpose to meet their current and future water needs.



We will continue to work with water companies, industry and other organisations such as the National Farmers Union to prepare and respond for the months ahead and urge everyone to use water wisely. Advice will also be shared with our partners, updated online and available from the Environment Agency National Customer Contact Centre at [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk) or on 03708 506 506.

We can all do our part to use water wisely and manage this precious resource, and there are useful water saving tips for us all at [Waterwise](#). While we ask people to use water wisely, they should follow current NHS advice on stopping the spread of coronavirus by washing hands with soap and water often.

### **Potential impacts on the environment and our response**

A lack of water in the environment can have severe impacts such as rivers and other habitats drying out which can lead to fish in distress. Our officers assess reports of such incidents, taking account of current coronavirus operating guidelines, and will decide how best to respond and deal with the situation.

As we move into Prolonged Dry Weather (developing drought) status we increase our monitoring of the environment using our telemetry systems and, subject to coronavirus operating guidelines, observations.

We increase our communication with partners and the public and encourage everyone to be careful in their use of water, whilst still following NHS guidance on good hygiene and hand washing.

We would encourage the public to look out for signs of fish in distress or other impacts on the environment and to report it by telephoning our 24hr Incident Hotline: 0800 80 70 60.

### **If you would like further information**

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More information can be found here:

[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency)

