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DEP Declares Statewide Drought Watch, Recommends Voluntary Water Conservation

Harrisburg, PA – Following a meeting of the Commonwealth Drought Task Force this week, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has declared a statewide drought watch. While not required, residents and businesses are encouraged to voluntarily conserve water by reducing their nonessential water use.

“Although this week has brought some welcome rain to much of the state, it’s not enough to make up for the lack of rainfall this spring, following a winter that brought little snowfall in many areas,” said **DEP Acting Secretary Rich Negrin**. “As a result, we’re seeing lowered stream flows, dropping groundwater levels, and persistent precipitation deficits. Water conservation, always a good practice, is especially helpful now as it’ll lessen potential future impacts on water supplies if rainfall continues to be scant this summer.”

Residents and businesses are encouraged to reduce their nonessential water use by 5–10 percent. For example, at home, there are many simple ways to use less water:

- Run the dishwasher and washing machine less often, and only with full loads.
- Don’t let the faucet run while brushing your teeth or shaving. Take shorter showers. For example, consider not washing your hair daily.
- Water your lawn only if necessary. Avoid watering on windy and hot days. Watering grass lightly and efficiently will encourage healthier, deeper grass roots. Overwatering is wasteful, encourages fungal growth and disease, and results in shallow, compacted root systems that are more susceptible to drought.
- When mowing your lawn, set the blades 2-3 inches high. Longer grass shades the soil, improving moisture retention.
- Water your garden less often. If necessary, water only in the cooler evening or morning hours, and direct the water to the ground at the base of the plant. Focus on new plantings, which have shallow root systems. Older plants may endure dry conditions longer.
- Skip the car washing. If you have to wash your car, it’s better environmentally to go to a drive-through car wash that recycles the water.
- Sweep your sidewalk, deck, or driveway, instead of hosing it off.
- Check for and repair household leaks. For example, a leaking toilet can waste up to 200 gallons of water daily.
- Set up a rain barrel to be ready to repurpose rain when it does fall. For helpful information, see this [Penn State Extension guide](#). Or just set out a bucket to capture water in the event of rain and reuse it to water plants or the bird bath.



For more tips for residents as well as fact sheets on how businesses such as lawn care services, landscapers, hotels, and restaurants can reduce water use, see the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Drought and WaterSense web page](#).

At this time, 18 public water suppliers are asking for voluntary water conservation in their communities. For a map of daily drought status and a weekly list of public water suppliers that are requesting or requiring water use reduction., see the [DEP drought web page](#). DEP is notifying all water suppliers of the need to monitor their supplies and update their drought contingency plans as necessary.

The Department of Agriculture encourages farm operations to plan to help protect their viability.

“Risks and volatility in farming are weather-related more than in any other business,” **Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding** said. “Pennsylvania’s beneficial natural average rainfall has been upended by weather extremes and unpredictability in recent years. This year is no exception, with more than 90 percent of the topsoil across the state either short or very short in moisture content in the past week.

“It’s critical for farmers, orchard owners, and other producers to keep track of losses and take advantage of federal crop insurance to help recoup those losses and state conservation funding and business planning grants to protect their soil, diversify their operations, and cushion against future weather-related losses. Planning cannot change the weather, but it can help farm businesses manage the risks that come with it.”

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) urges Pennsylvanians to be aware of increased fire risk.

Low precipitation has dramatically increased the number of wildfires in Pennsylvania this year. There have already been 1,400 wildfires reported statewide so far in 2023, compared to 1,036 in all of 2022. This year’s wildfires have burned more than 8,500 acres, compared to 2,700 acres in 2022.

“We’ve had an unprecedented year for wildfires in the Commonwealth, and we encourage all Pennsylvanians to act responsibly to prevent wildfires as dry conditions persist,” **DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn** said. “Pennsylvania wildfires pose a threat to public health because of the smoke they create. Though significantly smaller than the 10-million-acre wildfires in Canada, Pennsylvania wildfires still create the same hazardous air conditions in the areas impacted.”

DCNR reminds Pennsylvanians that 99 percent of wildfires are caused by people. DCNR is encouraging residents to understand the factors that increase the risk of wildfires, including an available fuel source, such as dried grass or leaves; dry conditions, including low relative humidity; and an ignition source to start the fire, such as sparks from an automobile, machine exhaust, or burning trash.

Visit [DCNR’s website](#) for more information on wildfire danger, maps, forecasts, and tips on reducing wildfire risks.



Drought watch, warning, and emergency status declarations aren't based on one indicator alone, such as precipitation. DEP assesses information provided by public water suppliers and data on four hydrologic indicators: precipitation, surface water (stream and river) flow, groundwater level, and soil moisture.

DEP monitors the indicators in close partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), which maintains gages in streams and wells in many locations across Pennsylvania.

There are normal ranges for all four indicators. DEP makes drought status recommendations after assessing departures from these ranges and comparing this information to historical data.

For a map that's updated daily to show the status of each indicator for each county, see the [USGS Pennsylvania drought condition monitoring website](#).

DEP provides data and recommendations to the state and federal agencies and other organizations that make up the Commonwealth Drought Task Force. Drought watch and warning declarations are determined by DEP, with the concurrence of the task force.

Drought emergency declarations follow the same process, with final approval by the Governor. No county is in drought warning or emergency status at this time.

For more information on how DEP monitors conditions and makes drought status declarations, see the [DEP drought management fact sheet](#).

The next Commonwealth Drought Task Force meeting is scheduled for July 6. Dates of upcoming meetings are posted on the DEP drought web page.

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