



Tree warden calls on residents to water local trees instead of their lawn

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It's been a dry, hot summer for much of Massachusetts, prompting more than 100 cities and towns to enact water use restrictions.

During the first week in July, the state's Department of Energy and Environmental Affairs declared a drought watch for central and northeastern Massachusetts, and a drought advisory for southeastern Massachusetts and the Connecticut River Valley.

"It's fairly unusual," said Alan Dunham, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Taunton office. "It's been at least four or five years since we were this dry."

Boston is more than 4.5 inches below normal precipitation levels since Jan. 1, and Worcester is more than 6.85 inches below normal, according to the National Weather Service. February is the only month in 2016 that saw above-average levels of precipitation fall on the region.

A drought watch is the third most serious designation in the five-tiered drought condition monitoring system. A drought advisory is less serious, but areas with that designation still warrant detailed monitoring of conditions, according to state environmental officials.

In Watertown, water use restrictions haven't been implemented yet, but the effects of drought are still being felt.

Watertown Conservation/Preservation Agent and Tree Warden Chris Hayward said he's concerned that residents are taking more time to water their lawns than the new trees planted along their streets.

In New England, turf grass goes dormant during the summer months, he said. Many people think that a brown lawn is a dead lawn but that is not the case.

"The grass will green up when sufficient rainfall makes its way back to the area," Hayward said. "On the other hand, young trees that brown up and lose their leaves are not able to take in the sunlight to produce the nutrients they need to survive."

These may be able to produce a new set of leaves but that causes extreme stress and ultimately can cause a much shortened life span.

According to Hayward, young trees require about 5-10 gallons a week and 15-20 gallons in drought conditions. Mature trees do not require excessive watering as they have established their root zones and can find and conserve water in various ways.

"To sum it up, lawns do not need to be watered in the summer months in New England," he said. "They will brown up and will come back year after year. Trees and shrubs require regular watering or they will have much shortened life spans."

"In Massachusetts, the drought conditions can vary significantly from community to community depending on where they receive their water from," explained Kirsten King, director of communications for the Holliston-based New England Water Works Association. "This drought is pretty unusual for New England. We haven't had significant rain. We've been seeing a lot of water restriction signs."

Communities that draw their water from small, underground aquifers are likely experiencing the biggest impacts from the drought, King said.

"Some aquifers can become very stressed very easily," she said. "It has to do with the topography and geography of the area and where that underground aquifer is drawing from."

Communications Director for the Charles River Watershed Association Alexandra Ash echoed Hayward's advice

"Our advice to residents is to not water their lawns during the drought," she said. "Dry lawns go dormant and will revive with rain and cooler weather. Keeping grass longer will also help the grass to retain moisture. For flower or vegetable gardens we recommend using a handheld hose only and to water only in the early morning or evening."

This week, Ash said, The Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force, which continues to monitor drought indicators has scheduled a meeting to discuss conditions.

The meeting, set for Thursday, also includes representatives of agencies that provide data used to assess the severity of drought conditions or that have the ability to respond to drought conditions, and public health and safety professionals.

Massachusetts Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matthew Beaton, in a statement, addressed the widespread problems droughts often spur.

"Drought conditions can contribute to lasting agricultural, environmental, and economic impacts, and also raise serious public safety concerns," Beaton said. "This drought declaration is an important tool which will help officials on all levels of government to work together to ensure we take action where necessary, and we advise all residents to conserve water and take increased care with any outdoor burning such as campfires and disposal of smoking materials."

Despite the widespread drought conditions, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, the state's largest public water supplier, reports no problems with its water stock.

"We're still in normal operating conditions for this time of year," MWRA spokeswoman Ria Convery said. "We do our best to conserve water everywhere and promote water conservation. We are watchful. We don't need to impose any restrictions."

The MWRA provides water to more than 2.5 million people in 51 communities, mostly around Metro Boston.

Thanks to changes to the plumbing code, infrastructure upgrades and the increasingly widespread use of efficient appliances, water consumption has fallen considerably through much of eastern Massachusetts over the past few decades. In the mid-1980s, for example, daily water use in the MWRA's territory topped 330 million gallons. Today, MWRA customers use 200 million gallons per day.

Each of the MWRA's surface reservoirs is at approximately 90 percent capacity, a level Convery described as the "low end of normal, but still within the normal operating range."

"The Quabbin Reservoir holds 410 billion gallons, which is five years worth of water," she said. "So if you think about it, 90 percent is still a lot of water."

But for many communities that don't draw from MWRA reservoirs, water use restrictions remain in effect.

"If folks really curb outside use, that's a big help," King said. "It's more important to keep the water flowing out of taps than to keep someone's lawn lush and green."

Margaret Van Deusen, Deputy Director and General Counsel for the Charles River Charles River Watershed Association said as they meet, the next steps officials take are critical.

"They will decide whether to move to a higher drought level in the northeast and central regions (from drought watch to warning) and what additional actions should be taken," she said. The next stage after that is a full blown emergency declared by the governor. Conditions have worsened since the task force last met in early July."

"While Watertown is on the MWRA system which with the Quabbin is more drought resilient, I have heard that the MWRA is pumping a lot of water this summer," she said.