

Act now on water or face emergency queues on the streets, UK warned

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Hosepipe ban and compulsory water metering needed, say advisers, as nation braces for drought

A national hosepipe ban should be implemented as a national priority along with compulsory water metering across the UK by the end of the decade.

That is the key message that infrastructure advisers have given the government as the nation braces itself for a drought that is threatening major disruption to the nation. Failure to act now would leave Britain facing a future of queueing for emergency bottled water “from the back of lorries”.

The government was warned four years ago by the National Infrastructure Committee (NIC) that considerable new investment would have to be made in the nation’s water supply equipment by the 2030s. Although some improvements have been made by water firms, nearly 3 billion litres of water is still lost every day.

Plugging these leaks will require an investment of around £20bn, Sir John Armit, chair of the committee, told the Observer this weekend. Failure to invest now will mean, he added, that more than twice as much will have to be spent on distributing bottled water to UK residents by lorry as increasingly frequent droughts grip the nation.

“You have to pay for it, one way or another,” he said. “That could be investing in new reservoirs or moving water around the country, as well as stopping leaks.” Water metering is considered by the industry as the best tool for cutting water use – the UK has the highest usage in Europe. It is estimated that water meters have been installed in only about half of households in England and Wales, but these customers use 33 litres a day less than the national average, of 141 litres a day.

The call by the NIC was backed by the Rivers Trust, which was one of the key agencies at the emergency National Drought Group meeting the government convened last week as dry conditions spread across England.

Mark Lloyd of the Rivers Trust said measures should be taken much earlier than the end of the decade. “There needs to be a nationally coordinated publicity campaign to reduce water use, and universal water metering,” he said. “Low flows in rivers are disastrous for wildlife and, ultimately, we need to take much more care of this incredibly precious resource.”

Mark Owen of the Angling Trust said hosepipe bans needed to be extended across the country, after Southern Water became the first firm to bring in a ban on Friday, for the Isle of Wight and Hampshire.

“We need to see these bans brought in proactively in many more places,” said Owen.

He criticised the lack of government planning for extreme weather. “There is no strategic, coherent, joined-up approach. The reaction is always kneejerk. What happens when we get to this stage – when it is very dry and hot – is that all of a sudden usage shoots up as people fill paddling pools and water their gardens.”

Tom Bradshaw, deputy president of the National Farmers’ Union, said more investment in water irrigation, on farm reservoirs and a better plan to manage water resources was needed. “The lack of rain means crops such as sugar beet and maize are showing signs of stress, while there are challenges for farmers needing to irrigate field veg and potatoes. The dry weather has also severely hampered grass growth, which could hit feed supplies for the winter.”

Critics say the government has had plenty of warnings, but seems to have taken no action.

“What we are seeing now is that climate impacts in terms of more extreme weather events are happening more frequently and at a greater magnitude than was anticipated,” said Martin Baxter of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment. “We have really got to become more resilient to what we know is on the way.”

A conglomerate of government bodies said that major plans were being prepared to improve water storage and transfer across England and Wales. A £500million scheme called Rapid – Regulators’ Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development – was set up jointly in 2019 by Ofwat, the Environment Agency (EA) and the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

“We are now investigating different schemes with the aim of implementing the most promising in a couple of years,” said Paul Hickey, managing director of Rapid.

Among the projects being considered are a series of new reservoirs that could be built in different parts of the country and schemes that would allow engineers to transfer water from the north of England, where supplies are not stressed, to the south. These would involve using the River Severn and the Grand Union canal as conduits for fresh water that would alleviate situation in the south of England, which has been worst affected by the drought.

These schemes will cost billions of pounds, however, and are unlikely to be implemented in the next decade.

July was the driest month on record since 1911, with only 24% of the amount of rain that would be expected in an average July, according to Met Office data. All areas of the country are affected, but in the south and east in particular the conditions are critical – with rainfall this July just 14% of an average July over the decade to 2020.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, rejected the call for compulsory water metering.

A spokesperson told the Observer:

“Water companies have a duty to ensure supplies. That’s why we continue to challenge those with a poor record on leakage and are working to ensure they introduce new infrastructure such as reservoirs and water transfers. We’re also taking forward measures to support water efficiency in homes.”

Source : [The Guardian](#)