

# Drought watch declared for all of Pa.

BY FRANK KUMMER (STAFF WRITER)

The recent rain just wasn't [enough](#).

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has declared a statewide drought watch and is encouraging residents and businesses to voluntarily conserve water.

“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,” acting DEP Secretary Rich Negrin said in a statement Thursday. “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.”

The Commonwealth Drought Task Force, which coordinates with the DEP, made the declaration. A drought watch is the first step in an escalating process that could lead to mandatory restrictions. It is followed by a warning, and then an emergency, which triggers restrictions. No Pennsylvania county is in a warning or emergency.

Regardless, officials are asking that people try to reduce “nonessential” water use by 5% to 10%. And 18 public water suppliers are also asking for voluntary water conservation. The amount of reduction being asked equates to about three to six gallons of water per day. For comparison, older toilets use up to six gallons per flush, but newer ones range from 1.2 to 1.6 gallons. A standard shower head uses 2.5 gallons per minute.

Some ways people can reduce water use:

Run the dishwasher and washing machine less frequently and only with full loads.

Don't let the faucet run while brushing teeth or shaving. Take shorter showers. Consider not washing hair daily.

Water the lawn only if necessary, and avoid it on windy or hot days.

Set mower blades 2 to 3 inches high, as longer grass shades soil and holds in moisture.

Water gardens less often and only in the cooler evening or morning hours.

If you have to wash a car, use a drive-through car wash that recycles water.

Don't hose off decks or sidewalks; use a broom instead.

Repair household leaks, such as a leaking toilet, which can waste 200 gallons of water daily.

Use a rain barrel to recycle rain. The Department of Agriculture encourages farm operations to plan to help protect their viability.

With the exception of April, the year has been dry, according to National Weather Service readings at Philadelphia International Airport. Normally Philadelphia gets 16.65 inches of precipitation for the period of January through May. This year, it has seen only 12.08 inches.

May was particularly dry. Philadelphia typically gets 3.34 inches of rain for the month. This year, it got 0.24.

The lack of rain has dramatically increased the number of wildfires in Pennsylvania this year, according to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). There have been 1,400 wildfires reported statewide in 2023, compared with 1,036 in all of 2022. The wildfires have burned more than 8,500 acres, compared with 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," said DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn.

"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."

Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding said more than 90% of topsoil across the state is either short or very short in moisture content. Redding said that has increased the stress on farmers, who have already dealt with "weather extremes and unpredictability in recent years."

Indeed, Pennsylvania had to [issue a drought watch](#) in August 2022 for 36 counties, including Philadelphia, Bucks, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties.

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