

# WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION

December 2020



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## Criteria used to protect the environment and water users during drought conditions

The [National Water Scarcity Plan](#) sets out the hierarchy of action expected from those involved with water management and use, during prolonged dry periods. The slowly developing nature of these events, in comparison to flooding, allows us to take a staged approach that is proportionate to the risk to the environment and water users. As conditions worsen and reach 'significant water scarcity' we have said that temporary suspension of abstractions is required to protect the environment.

Following a review of water scarcity events during 2018 and previous years, we updated how 'significant water scarcity' is determined in the [National Water Scarcity Plan](#) (Annex 4 of that plan) to provide greater transparency and clarity.

To move away from a reactive approach to water management we now propose to include a condition in abstraction licences based on these same criteria. The introduction of the condition would be developed through our sector plans to ensure sector specific issues are taken on board.

We have reviewed the hydrological conditions and ecological impacts in the 2018 drought and considered these along with other evidence. While the conditions can vary, impacts always reflect a prolonged period of dry weather. When rivers remain at low flows for an extended period, they are highly sensitive to further reductions of flow and/or abstraction, with a heightened risk of severe, long-lasting ecological impact.

**The average river flows in the region concerned have remained exceptionally low for 30 days in a row.**

This will be defined when the five day mean flow is less than or equal to Q95 for 30 consecutive days.

### **Explanation of terms**

The five day mean flow is the flow in a river averaged over a five-day period. It is used to smooth out brief rises or falls in flow. These average river flows are calculated using a SEPA flow monitoring site that is representative of rivers in the region.

The Q95 is a term used to describe an exceptionally low flow level. It is a flow which, on average, a river only dips below for 5% of the time. This equates to 18 separate days in any year on average.

This approach will only kick in roughly every 10 years and ensures the environment is protected as a last resort in these prolonged dry periods. It allows us time to work with stakeholders over a longer-term to support adaptation. Over time we hope this condition becomes less relevant because all water users have taken responsibility to ensure they have adapted and have looked at more sustainable sources of water.

SEPA will continue to work with stakeholders to provide useful information as early as possible to let water users make decisions about upcoming water usage.

Our [Water Scarcity page](#) has weekly updates and the latest positions.

The [Drought Risk Assessment Tool](#) displays which gauging stations have dropped below the Q95 level and for how many days. Abstraction licences will be grouped to the most relevant gauging station.

The condition wouldn't apply to the following situations:

- groundwater abstractions;
- cumulative abstraction taking no more than 5% of Qn98;
- water abstracted and returned immediately adjacent to the abstraction (i.e. no depleted reach);

- abstractions already limited at low flows (often referred to as a hands off flow);
- heavily modified water bodies for water storage;
- public water supplies.

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