

Frequently Asked Questions About Drought

Podcast transcript

Jimmy Norris: Since last week's drought announcement, we've had a lot of people looking for more information. Here's ecology drought coordinator, Jeff Marty, with answers to some of the most frequently asked questions.

Why were Tacoma, Seattle and Everett excluded from the drought emergency declaration?

Jeff Marti: When we make a drought determination, we consider both hydrology and the potential for hardship and severe impacts to things like drinking water, and Tacoma, Seattle and Everett are all large, robust water systems, large service areas and they have storage. They have reservoirs where they've captured waters and it gives them a lot of safety in these dry times of year. They aren't vulnerable to water shortages under the current conditions.

Jimmy Norris: But cities like Olympia and Yakima, those are also large cities with water storage aren't they?

Jeff Marti: It's true in general that mid-large sized municipalities are very resilient in times of drought. They plan for years like this with critical conditions. But the areas in general that we did include in the drought are more rural areas and more rural water systems. We also look at values like agriculture and fisheries as well.

Jimmy Norris: Now we've also heard a lot of talk about snowpack and how we bragged about our healthy snow pack right before we started talking about the drought. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Jeff Marti: Yeah. Well our snowpack was worth bragging about. We got into April with 132% of normal. The catch is that not all watersheds in our state benefit from that snowpack. We have a number of areas in our state that are more rain dominant. These are lower elevation areas. Areas in eastern Washington on the Columbia plateau where there isn't a lot of irrigation, they're more dependent on precipitation for dry land agriculture. The snowpack is great, it tends to benefit those rivers that are higher elevation, the tributaries and the bigger rivers. Some of these smaller rivers that originate at lower elevations don't benefit from the snowpack to the same degree.

Jimmy Norris: Another question that keeps popping up is there are people out there saying "Can I water my lawn, wash my car, do my dishes, take a shower?" What do we have to say to people who want answers to these questions?

Jeff Marti: My first recommendation is check with your local water provider where you get your water from. Your local city, your public utility district, maybe you get water from a private water purveyor. Check with them, they will know whether or not folks need to be conserving extra special in their service area in order to keep up with supply. They're monitoring their well levels, they may have storage as well. If they need you to conserve, they will likely have some good tips for you.

Jimmy Norris: And what can the people do to help or contribute to a solution during these dry, hot times?

Jeff Marti: Collectively we can make a bit of an impact. SO in your local life, start by reducing nonessential water use. You know, basic things. Instead of using a hose to clean your sidewalk, use a broom. Keep your shower time modest. Don't let the water run when you're brushing your teeth. Plug leaks, that's a big deal. If you can find leaks then plug those that's just water wasted. Take care of things like that. On the household level, you may not think it adds up to much. But consider that you are one of hundreds, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of households so collectively, that can add up to a significant quantity of water.

Jimmy Norris: And does anybody need to worry about running out of drinking water?

Jeff Marti: Chances are, you're going to be just fine this year in terms of your drinking water. There are some areas in the state, smaller water systems. Much different than Seattle, Tacoma or Everett where they might have a shallow well or they might get water from a small creek, they don't have backup supplies. Those are the systems that if they struggle in times like this we tend to see that happening. I don't think you should worry too much personally that you're going to run out of water. If you're on a private well and in past years you've encountered times where your well has gone dry or start sucking air, this is a year where you want to stay on top of your well conditions and have some understanding of what your water levels are with respect to the depth of your pump so if you need to cut back on your own water use you can do that, because you don't want to burn out your pump and you don't want to dry out your well because then you're in a serious situation.

Jimmy Norris: And last question: why didn't we declare drought sooner?

Jeff Marti: Yeah well, we've certainly been aware of the dry conditions this spring. we did declare and advisory at the end of May. But the conditions now are much more severe. The dryness has persisted and we've also seen some deterioration of conditions even in our snowpack dominated areas to where we think that the latter half of our season will have lower than normal flows and we're starting to curtail rights even for irrigators. So that's essentially why.

Jimmy Norris: That was Ecology drought coordinator, Jeff Marty, answering frequently asked questions about drought. To learn more about the drought in Washington State, visit our website at ecology.wa.gov.