



## Drought Lowers Water in Reservoir to Critical Levels

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**Link to Video:** <http://www.northjersey.com/news/drought-emergency-in-n-j-could-follow-a-dry-winter-1.1684538>

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The white marks on the Morris Lake Spillway show where water levels should be at the Sussex County Reservoir. But drought conditions throughout the state and in Sparta have put it at the lowest level in nearly a decade.

“Late fall, we’re usually low, but we are approaching critical conditions,” said [New Jersey Highlands Coalition](#) Policy Director Elliott Ruga.

In Newton, Sussex County neighbors have been feeling the consequences for nearly 15 months. Last year the town council initiated a mandatory water restriction on its residents. Roughly 8,000 New Jerseyans in the upper western corner of the state rely on Morris Lake for drinking water.

“The town of Newton uses roughly about 800,000 gallons of water per day and each inch of the reservoir is equivalent to about 4 million gallons. So every week it’s been going down about an inch or close to two inches,” said Newton Township Water Engineer David Simmons.

When the water restrictions went into effect last September, levels were just 18 inches below the spillway. Meaning the lack of snow over the winter meant no runoff to help replenish the lake.

“What we see here is going on throughout the state. We’re in the highlands of New Jersey. The reservoirs of the highlands provides 70 percent of the population of New Jersey with water and what we see here is typical. Water levels are almost half of capacity,” Ruga said.

In fact, the [New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection](#) recently issued drought warnings in 14 northern and central New Jersey counties, a watch in four others, with just three southern counties remaining unaffected.

How much rainfall do we need to see to replenish these levels?

“We would need to see sustained rainfall over several weeks of heavy rain,” Ruga said.

Despite the severity, several residents we spoke with seemed unaware the drought was worsening.

When Newton resident Mary Graham was asked if she has heard anyone talk about the drought or cutting back on water usage, she said, “I haven’t heard anything. Nothing.”

Has Newton resident Louis Nappi changed his behavior — shorter showers, less laundry?

“No but I don’t really take a lot of long showers anyway. I’m in and out so there really would be no need for change,” he said.

So this time of year where I’m standing, this water level should be up to my shoulders. And in the late spring, it should be well over my head.

When the rain or snow does come, Newton’s water engineer says plans are in place to help the reservoir along.

“There’s also a diversion called pine swamp diversion, which is another two square miles that the towns got prepared to divert runoff from the snowfall this winter into the reservoir to help augment the water supply,” Simmons said.

Until then water restrictions remain in place. As the levels continue to sink, the hope for rain and an end to this worst drought in years remains high.