

Washington Township drought threatens area water supplies

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WASHINGTON TWP.—Despite recent thunderstorms, the reservoirs in North Jersey are much drier than normal as the specter of drought begins to be seen throughout western Morris County.

Although precipitation has been near normal for the past 90 days, factors such as groundwater levels and 90-day stream flow have dipped to “severely dry” ratings in the department of Environmental protection’s Drought Information reports.

The trend is disturbing, according to Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

“As this part of the world experiences climate change, we are seeing more frequent droughts. The original standards of the Highlands Act were made to be conservative in light of that,” said Somers. “It was an important decision to make and a new direction for the state.

“If we return to the old ways, there would be severe water problems the way it used to be.”

Critics of the 2004 Highlands Act have charged that septic density standards and watershed standards were developed based upon the worst-case droughts of the mid-1960s.

“This is a reminder of the reason we passed the legislation in the first place,” said Somers. “It’s a reminder of why not to weaken the act.”

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council is charged with enforcing standards and planning to protect the water source of 64 percent of the state’s population.

Drought Update

Here and in neighboring Mount Olive, where the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River are located, groundwater status reached “severely dry” this week, while 90-day totals of precipitation and stream flow have been at “moderately dry” levels for three consecutive weeks.

Washington Township is included in the central region for drought reporting, along with the Chesters and Mount Olive.

There are four levels of drought reporting, ranging from “near and above normal” at best to “extremely dry” at worst.

In the Northeast drought reporting region, conditions are slightly worse. The 90-day precipitation indicator has been “moderately dry” for four straight weeks, 90-day stream flow is “severely dry” for the past two weeks and groundwater has been initially reported as “severely dry” this past week.

The Mendhams, Harding Township, Randolph, Roxbury, Mount Arlington and Mine Hill are all included in the Northeast drought region.

On the Mountain

At this time, the Washington Township Municipal Utilities Authority (MUA) does not expect to need any additional restrictions to make it through the summer with sufficient water for the Schooley's Mountain system.

"It's holding up fine," said Sam Akin, chairman of the MUA Board of Directors. "With a little bit of rain, half-an-inch the other night, we're doing well."

Customers in the Schooley's Mountain system are prohibited from lawn watering on weekends and may do so only between 7 and 8 a.m. and p.m. on odd or even numbered days. Plant watering is also restricted by method.

The restrictions are in effect until Sept. 15. Similar restrictions have been in effect during summer months for most of the past two decades.

Reservoir reductions

At the 13 reservoirs in the Northeast New Jersey area, water storage has been reported below normal levels since the first week in June. The reservoirs, owned by four separate agencies, are at 80 percent capacity, somewhat below the normal level of 86 percent in late July.

Reservoir storage is designed to accumulate water from spring rains to be used during the normally drier months in summer and early autumn. Typically, the lowest reservoir levels are reported in late October. State drought warnings and emergency declarations are based on reservoir levels.

By comparison, in 2009, combined storage levels were at 95 percent of capacity as late as August 31.

Fire danger low

To date, the stream and groundwater deficits have not translated themselves into any fire condition warnings.

As of Tuesday, July 27, fire danger in all of Morris County and northwest New Jersey is rated "low". However, it has been a more active fire season in 2010 than in the previous year.

In June, 109 fires burned about 1,000 acres statewide. Only 17 fires involving 6 acres were reported the previous June.

Highlands future

Somers said more will be known about the effectiveness of the Highlands Council under the current Republican administration in Trenton in the near future.

"The Governor (Chris Christie) will send a clear message by the people he appoints to the Highlands Council," she said.

As many as ten of 15 seats on the council are open, although some members may be asked to stay on past the end of their terms.

Mendham Township Committeeman Jack Schrier has been interim chairman of the council since the resignation of John Weingart in January.

At the same time, the department of Environmental protection has announced its intention to review the septic density standards contained in the Highlands Master Plan, the set of goals and regulations that guide the agency. Under current standards only one residential home may be built for every 25 acres of cleared land and only one for every 88 semi-forested acres.