

October rain puts a damper on Maine's lengthy drought

Heavy storms have replenished surface water, but dry conditions persist in most areas, groundwater levels remain low and the state still has a water deficit.

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Two weeks of wet weather have eased the severity of Maine's drought, but dry conditions persist across most of the state, according to federal data released Thursday.

Almost 8.5 inches of rain fell at the Portland International Jetport in October, nearly twice the normal amount, according to the National Weather Service. Most of the rain has come since Oct. 21, easing severe and extreme drought conditions in southern and coastal Maine that [set in this summer](#).

There are now no parts of the state in extreme drought, the second-most-severe federal classification. At [the end of September](#) almost 10 percent of the state was in extreme drought. The area in severe drought, the third-most serious condition, declined from about 19 percent of the state last week to roughly 13.5 percent, mostly in southern and central Maine and the midcoast.

Although recent rain has provided some relief, it has not yet replenished groundwater reserves and may not be enough to affect Maine's long-term drought. More than 1.2 million Mainers are still living in drought conditions, and 86 percent of the state is either in drought or abnormally dry, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

"We have got a lot of rain in the short term, but overall we are still in a deficit," said Nicholas Stasulis, data section chief at the U.S. Geological Survey. "It took us a long

time to get into these drought conditions. It is going to take a long time to get out again.”

SURFACE WATER VS. GROUNDWATER

Water levels in the state’s main river networks are closer to normal than they were a month ago, when some waterways dropped to historic lows. Unlike surface water supplies, groundwater reserves have yet to be recharged from the rain, Stasulis said.

The seven Maine wells monitored by the Geological Survey had the lowest October levels in 27 years. It will take awhile for recent rainfall to work its way into aquifers and restore groundwater levels, Stasulis said. If the ground starts to freeze and precipitation turns to snow, significant groundwater recharge in southern Maine, where the drought has been most severe, might not happen until snow pack starts melting next year, he said.

The York Water District this week said its reservoir had refilled enough so that it could suspend emergency water delivery from the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and the Wells Water District.

York triggered a standing agreement in [mid-September to pump in water from nearby communities](#) after levels in the Chase’s Pond reservoir dropped more than 4 feet below the measuring point at the top of the pond’s dam. The emergency supplies accounted for roughly 30 percent of the district’s total, said superintendent Don Neumann.

In October, water levels in the pond were 5 feet below the monitoring point, about 2 feet lower than normal fall levels. The low levels coincided with York’s busy summer season, when the district is pumping as many as 2.2 million gallons of water a day, compared with 900,000 gallons a day in the fall and winter, Neumann said.

The pond’s level is back up to just above normal for this time of year, and additional rain this week will help even more, he said.

Even with the wet October, rainfall is still about 11 inches below normal this year, and although the district will stop using emergency water, things aren't back to normal yet. "We have to obviously keep an eye on this very closely," Neumann said.

SOME WELLS STILL LOW ON WATER

Some people whose [shallow dug wells went dry](#) during the height of the drought are still waiting for the rain to have an effect.

Nina Fuller, who has a farm in Hollis, said her pond is halfway back to a normal level, a brook through her property is running strong, and she has five full 50-gallon barrels of rainwater. However, her old stone well that went dry last month hasn't shown much improvement.

"It still looks like it did this summer," Fuller said. She's waiting for rainwater to soak through the ground into the area's aquifer, but will have to use rainwater for her animals and to wash dishes and flush the toilet until then.

At a meeting Thursday, the Maine Drought Task Force said the rain was providing temporary relief from drought conditions, but cautioned against seeing it as a permanent fix. The task force is still advising residents to use water wisely, such as by taking shorter showers, fixing leaky faucets and toilets, and not running water when brushing teeth or shaving.

"The current drought period is the result of three years of below-average precipitation," said Thomas Redstone, a natural hazards planner at the Maine Emergency Management Agency. "This rain has provided much-needed relief, but we have no way of knowing whether that relief is short-term or if precipitation levels will return to normal long enough to end this drought."

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