

## EVERYTHING'S SO THIRSTY

'Getting more concerned' as dry conditions continue

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"Moderate" is the word to describe the conditions in York at the moment, as dry weather persists throughout the region. Officials say York has been lucky to get rain from some summer storms while nearby communities did not. But now going into typically dry August, officials are watching the sky "day to day." This photo was taken at the York Beach fire station. Photo by Deborah McDermott

YORK — Chases Pond is down 1.5 feet as compared to last year – at the bottom of the normal range and being closely monitored. Village and beach fire departments are still giving out burn permits, but that could change if these dry conditions persist. County emergency management officials say people with dug wells are beginning to experience some problems.

And several local farmers say they are just very lucky to have their own sources of water because everything but everything is thirsty these days.

That is the snapshot of conditions in York right now, as the region continues to experience dry conditions. The U.S. Drought Service monitor places most of York County in a severe drought condition, although a York County official termed it a moderate drought. According to the National Weather Service in Gray, the last two-day rainfall occurred in late June; other than that, the region has been experiencing below-normal conditions since April.

The situation was concerning enough that the Maine Drought Task Force met for the first time in 14 years last week.

Locally, fire and water district officials don't paint quite the dire picture as the Drought Service monitor suggests. Unlike some communities in Seacoast New Hampshire that have already turned to conservation measures, York has received rain from several summer

thunderstorms that hit locally here. But the heavy rainfall that typically accompanies those storms are not as helpful as a long, steady, gentle rain would be.

"We're getting more concerned as the days progress," said York Beach Fire Chief Dave Bridges, who said the area is about 2.5 inches of rain below normal for this time of year. "We haven't seen extreme conditions yet, but it's a concern as we progress day after day without rain. And August is normally dry."

Meteorologist Chris Kimble of the National Weather Service in Gray said, "I don't see anything too terribly significant in terms of rain in the forecast. Looking out, there are no indicators there" for significant rainfall in the near future.

Conditions for forest fires are assessed daily by the state of Maine by region on a scale of 1-5. At level 3, the danger becomes high and burn permits are typically suspended. Right now, said York Village Fire Chief Chris Balentine, "we're just below a three. What rain we have gotten has been great, but it's not enough to totally wipe out the problem. All it's going to take is something of a careless sort of nature for things to go sour."

Don Neumann, superintendent of the York Water District, said Chases Pond is down 1.5 feet from last year, "but the supply is still in good shape. We don't have problems yet," he said. In recent years, the district has replaced or repaired mains throughout the town. As a result, only about 5 percent of water is unaccounted for system wide. During past drought-type periods, leakage was far greater – 40 percent unaccounted for in 1993 – so much more water is staying in the pond, said Neumann.

Right now, these first few weeks in August, are prime vacation weeks, with 2.25 million gallons being used daily, as opposed to 1.4 million gallons in October. Still, even with that, Neumann said there's still a good supply.

Treatment plant manager Ryan Lynch characterized conditions as severely to extremely dry but not a drought yet. He said he'd like to see 4 inches of rainfall to bring the reservoir up, but even 2.5 inches would be a help. He said the National Weather Service is predicting rain will increase by October, "and we're hoping to see rain between now and then."

Neumann said at the moment, customers have nothing to be concerned about, but cautioned, "If this continues, we may have to go to voluntary conservation. But it will never come to the point of a ban."

Meanwhile, several local farmers said they're managing because they have their own water sources.

"You couldn't be any drier, said Abe Zacharias at Zacharias Farm. "It never rained all spring. Thank goodness I have four irrigation ponds, but all of them are down. They're about half way gone."

He said it's costing him "a lot of extra diesel fuel" to pump the water out of the ponds, and into pipes which have to be manually moved around the field. "So I have a lot of man hours into it this summer."

So far, he's been able to irrigate his crops, and the same is true of Bill Connolly of Connolly's Organics in York. "We got nervous a couple of times when the pump was going all day," he said of his well pump. "You really have to have a prodigious amount of water when there's a drought, everything's so thirsty. But I've got a manageable amount of land and I've got the water, so I'm good to go."

Art Cleaves, York County Emergency Management director, participated in the Drought Task Force meeting last week via conference call. He said the region is experiencing "moderate drought conditions" – quite different from northern Maine, which is experiencing no problems at all.

His biggest concern at the moment is for individuals who have dug wells, versus drilled wells. "That's what we're starting to see fail," he said. Most York County towns, like York, "have good water reserves so we're not in any danger of communities losing water."

But, like others, he said he's viewing the situation day to day.

"My concerns will get deeper and deeper if we don't get a good soaking," he said.

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