14 November 2025

Prospects for winter refill of irrigation reservoirs and drought forecast for 2026

Forward

This report outlines the prospects for refilling irrigation reservoirs this winter on the basis of projected river flows under three different rainfall scenarios, 100%, 80% and 60%.

The question everyone is asking is 'will there be a drought next year' and the **answer is yes unless there is at least average rainfall through the winter**. Where and how bad the drought could be will reflect how much rain we receive through the winter.

The Met Office's 3 month outlook for November through to January is a 30% chance of a dry period across the UK. This means that there is **a higher than normal likelihood of dry weather**, e.g. less rain than long term average. There may be regional variations but farmers need to prepare for a potentially dry winter.

With 100% of long-term average (LTA) rainfall we expect that **most** irrigation reservoirs will refill with abstractions authorised by licences which allow abstraction during the winter months.

If 80% of LTA rainfall is received this winter, it is expected that similar conditions are likely to this year with drought at the spring stretching through the country. The Environment Agency expects that hands off flow restrictions on abstraction licences will remain in force through to March 2026. Therefore, reservoir refill prospects are moderate across most of England. Under this scenario there is also an **increased risk that Section 57 restrictions** may be required in the spring across some areas of England, especially if groundwater and river flows are significantly lower than average.

A 60% rainfall scenario this winter would mean that there is a significant risk to water resources across the country with widespread hands off flow restrictions as a result of significantly below average river flows and groundwater. As a result, reservoir refill prospects are expected to be poor and likely to cause significant resilience issues for next year's irrigation season.

It is expected that **above 100%** of Long-Term Average (LTA) rainfall is needed across England for **rivers to return to normal levels** in spring 2026, and **above 120%** of LTA rainfall is needed for groundwater levels in chalk aquifers to return to normal levels in most sites.

Combined with the Met Office outlook for a potentially dry winter, farmers should be prepared for the possibility that Hands-off-Flow (HOF) conditions and section 57 spray restrictions may be implemented over the spring- summer, if we do not receive sufficient rainfall over the winter.

2025 Drought impact on agriculture

The impact of drought on agriculture this year has been significant. Farmers have experienced a challenging and difficult season with poor grass growth, low forage yields and, where no irrigation has been available, reduced quality and yields for field vegetables.

The harvest season finishes with minimal reservoir volumes available for carry-over to next year for irrigation and dry soils. The success and yield of crops planted this winter and next spring are dependent on the rainfall this winter and groundwater recharge. This is needed to improve soil moisture and refill reservoirs (where farmers have this available as a resilience option).
Autumn drilled crops (for example oil seed rape and winter wheat) are dependent on soil moisture for germination. The decisions made by farmers on timing of drilling will affect germination success and requirements for the control of black grass, pests and disease risk. Some areas of England have started to see improving soil moisture conditions which will help to pave the way for groundwater recharge.

For livestock producers, this year has been poor for growing forage stocks. The dry conditions have led to farmers feeding existing forage stocks to their livestock in the summer months. Producers are looking to extend the grazing season as long as possible to reduce costs. Some livestock businesses are now short of forage for feeding their livestock over the winter months and will need to find alternative sources such as by-product feeds or sell their stock.

The risk to agriculture of a dry autumn and winter is complex as farming is affected by a multitude of different factors, of which winter rainfall is but one. The impacts of the 3 rainfall scenarios on this sector are considered later in the report.

Water Resources Situation

Overall England has received 149% of long-term average (LTA) rainfall in September and 90% of LTA rainfall during October. There have been some regional variations with drier conditions experienced in eastern parts of the country. November has seen further rainfall with 47% LTA rainfall received up to 11 November 2025. Despite the rainfall received this autumn so far, it has not been enough to recover from 8 out of the last 10 months being drier than average.
The majority of river flows are currently normal or higher for the time of year, however some flows across eastern parts of the country are below average or exceptionally low for the time of year. As of 13 November 2025, there are 353 hands of flow restrictions in force where river flows are low, which will limit the ability for some farmers to refill irrigation reservoirs.
Although the recent wetter conditions have reduced soil moisture deficits across northern areas of England, they remain high across some parts of England, particularly in the east. Groundwater levels decreased at more than four-fifths of sites, and the majority of sites were classed as normal or lower at the end of October.

Long range weather forecast

For the remainder of November, colder and less unsettled conditions are likely, but some wintry showers are possible over higher ground in the north. Towards late November and early December, the forecast becomes more uncertain but there is a chance of more unsettled conditions from the Atlantic with spells of wind and rain likely, with a risk of snow over higher ground in the north. Some drier, brighter interludes are likely with a risk of frost and fog.
The Met Office's 3 month outlook for November through to January is a 30% chance of a dry period across the UK. This means that there is **a higher than normal likelihood of dry weather**, e.g. less rain than long term average. There may be regional variations, but farmers need to prepare for a potentially dry winter.

More information on weather forecasts is available at the Met Office

Drought Prospects for 2026

100% long-term average rainfall scenario

Under a 100% LTA rainfall scenario, we would expect the water resources situation to improve over the winter.

The sector expects most irrigation reservoirs across the country to be sufficiently refilled ahead of next year's irrigation season as shown in **Figure 1.**
Prospects are good across most parts of England, but where groundwater or river flows are below normal over the winter, there is a risk that some reservoirs may not completely refill ahead of the irrigation season. This is because there may be some local restrictions on abstraction.

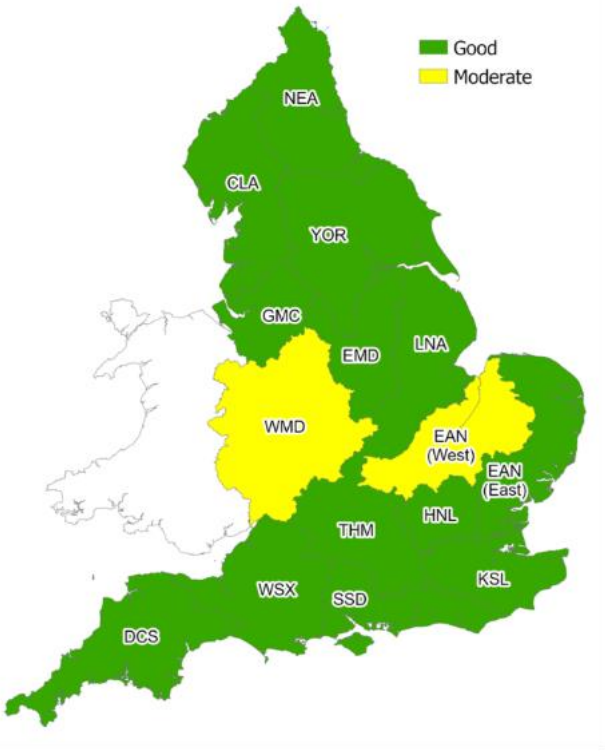

Figure 1: Irrigation reservoir refill prospects under 100% LTA rainfall scenario

80% long-term average rainfall scenario

In this rainfall scenario, river flows are likely to be low through to March, with most river levels at below normal or notably low. In contrast, some rivers in the south-east of England could be at normal levels. For example, some rivers in the Chilterns are likely to be sustained from higher groundwater levels or are in catchments which have benefitted from the recent rainfall which supports flow.

We would expect limited groundwater recharge in some areas. This will delay recovery and reduce the support it provides to river baseflows in spring and summer. Many aquifers would be or remain at notably low levels, and some might be exceptionally low for the time of year.

Under this scenario, it is expected that there will be a risk that not all irrigation reservoirs will be completely refilled. **Figure 2** shows that the prospects of refilling irrigation reservoirs over the winter are moderate across most parts of England. West Midlands is an exception, where poor conditions are expected under this scenario. Good conditions are expected across Yorkshire, Wessex and Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly area.

Hands-off flow restrictions will likely be in force, especially if river flows and groundwater are projected to be below average through to March 2026. Hands off flows are in-built conditions on some abstraction licences. They require abstractors to either reduce or stop abstraction when river flows fall below a predetermined level set out in the licence. This will limit reservoir refill and is likely to increase the risk to water supplies for crops that require irrigation in spring 2026.

Some impacts on agriculture will depend on whether farm storage reservoirs can be successfully recharged to full capacity and whether soils have wetted sufficiently for non-irrigated crops to thrive. This scenario is likely to result in reduced vegetable production and cropping plans may need to be reviewed if there are concerns around water availability for next year.

Under this scenario, there is also an increased risk that Section 57 restrictions may be required during the spring across some areas of the country. This is especially the case if groundwater and river flows are significantly below average. Section 57 restrictions are emergency restrictions for spray irrigation only. They are implemented as part of a phased approach to reduce water abstraction, to protect the environment when water resources are critically low.

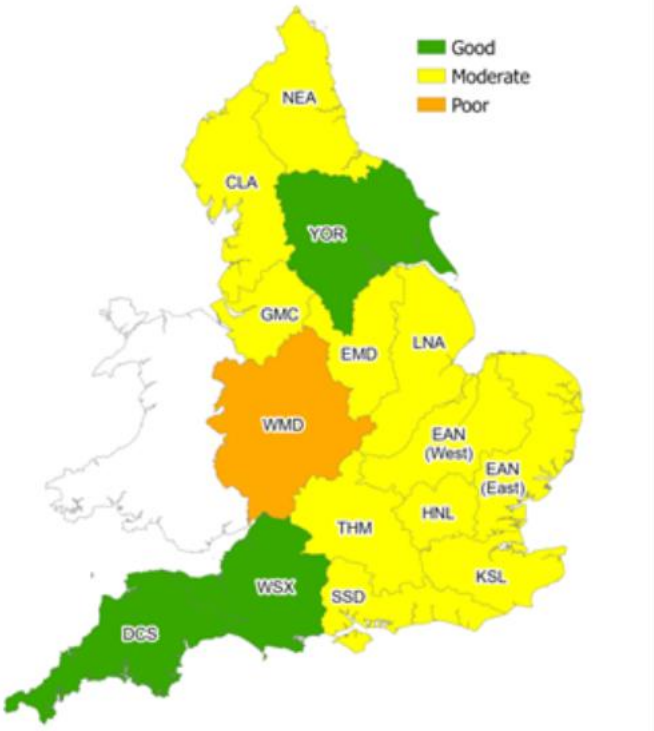

Figure 2: Irrigation reservoir refill prospects under 80% LTA rainfall scenario

60% long-term average rainfall scenario

In this scenario, all of England would be in drought conditions by the start of spring and under significant water resources risks in this scenario. River flows would largely be exceptionally low and most groundwater levels would be at notably or exceptionally low, causing serious concern ahead of summer.

There is a significant risk that irrigation reservoirs will not be refilled sufficiently by the spring. **Figure 3** shows that reservoir refill prospects are poor across most areas of England with the exception to Yorkshire, East Midlands, Wessex and Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly area that are expected to have moderate prospects.

Hands-off flow abstraction restrictions are likely to be widespread. This will significantly reduce the ability for irrigators to adequately refill reservoirs ahead of spring and will impact on water resilience for next year.
The lack of access to water for irrigating crops in spring and the possibility of early hands-off flow restrictions are likely to make this situation far worse in terms of reduced vegetable production next year.

Low rainfall into spring 2026 could also impact grass growth. With an already limited supply of forage going into winter, forage is unlikely to be available at reasonable cost. Soils are unlikely to have rewetted over the winter which in turn will result in a limited and reduced recharge of groundwater.

There is also a significant risk of Section 57 restrictions on spray irrigation being implemented during the spring. This is particularly for areas where groundwater and river flows are likely to be significantly below average.

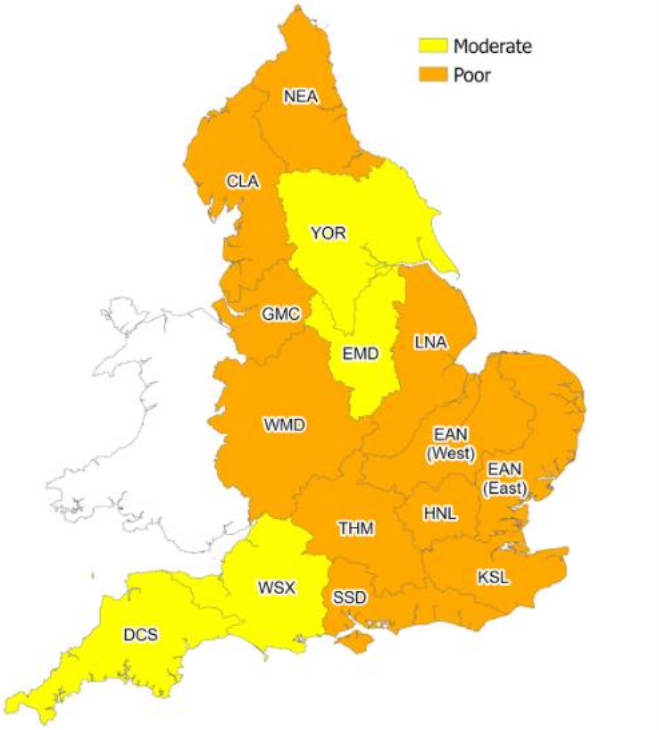

Figure 3: Irrigation reservoir refill prospects under 60% LTA rainfall

Actions by the farming community to reduce the impacts of a dry winter and drought in spring 2026

Farmers who have decided on cropping patterns for next year and will be planting crops that need higher volumes of water should ensure they have access to sufficient water supplies. Farmers can seek to trade water rights, form abstractor groups to share water or apply for variations to their

abstraction licences so they have enough resilience in place. Some farmers might choose to adjust their cropping patterns to grow more drought tolerant crops or adjust areas based on limited water availability.
These decisions will be made based not only on water availability but also on disease pressure and demand from producers.
We are supporting farmers with a continued package of measures which are described below.

Short term access to water
Short term options may be available to improve access to water outside of licence conditions provided that other abstractors and the environment remain protected.
For more information see the our guidance water abstraction during prolonged dry weather and drought. We will talk to farmers about short-term options for improving access to water outside abstraction licence conditions.

Regulatory position statements
Our regulatory position statement available that covers information on when abstractors can take water outside of abstraction licence conditions during a flood warning.

Trading water rights
Abstractors can consider trading water rights with other licence holders or sharing water to improve access to water supplies. See guidance on trading water abstraction rights which includes links to Help for Water Rights Trading Data and a water rights trading map.

Managing abstraction or impoundment licences online
Review abstraction licences to ensure that they still meet their needs to comply with conditions and meet future requirements.
Sign up to our Managing your water abstraction or impoundment licence online service. This will allow abstractors to submit abstraction returns and view their licence information. Some licence holders will also have access to water abstraction email alerts which will inform them when hands off flow restrictions are in force or lifted.

Farmers should ensure that they refill irrigation reservoirs at the earliest opportunity if licence conditions allow, to ensure greater resilience for next year's irrigation season. Farmers should be ready to take water during any high flow events to maximise the fill of on farm reservoirs.

Winter farm preparation communications
Advice is available on the preparations farmers can take over the winter following this year dry weather on our latest blog.
The National Farmers Union will continue to provide support and advice through its dry weather web page on its website. It plans to update its advice and guidance on preparedness for a dry winter and spring and this will include:

- checking reservoir integrity and leaks
- changes to agri-environment schemes that are affected by dry weather

Crop Review
Review cropping, crop varieties and rotation plans for next year taking account of possible limited water availability using tools such as D- Risk to rapidly understand local drought and abstraction risks and thereby support robust decisions.

Long-term actions

We are encouraging farmers to develop and join Water Abstractor Groups. The National Farmers Union and Regional Water Resources Groups are actively meeting with groups of farmers to support the formation of new groups. The UK Irrigation Association has a directory of existing Water Abstractor Groups and hosts a booklet which explains how they might support abstractors.

The Environment Agency, funded by Defra, has also been progressing Local Resource Option Screening studies. Currently there are 33 studies looking at improving water resources resilience for groups of farmers. Examples include rainwater harvesting, high flow abstraction, re-cycled water and use of water from Internal Drainage Boards.

Future Updates

The Environment Agency will provide an update on the prospects for next year's spray irrigation in our initial irrigation prospect report at the end of **February 2026.**