

26 February 2026

Initial prospects for irrigation - forecast for 2026

Our current irrigation prospects are **GOOD** for this spring across most of England. The irrigation prospects reflect the water situation using current rainfall, river flows, groundwater conditions, latest available weather forecasts and Met Office seasonal outlooks.

The water resources situation has significantly improved through the winter with sufficient refill of most irrigation reservoirs. For the 3-month cumulative period (November to January), rainfall totals were above normal or higher across most of England. Rainfall over this autumn and winter is tracking above the 100% long term average rainfall scenario for the irrigation reservoir refill, as outlined in our previous [prospects report](#).

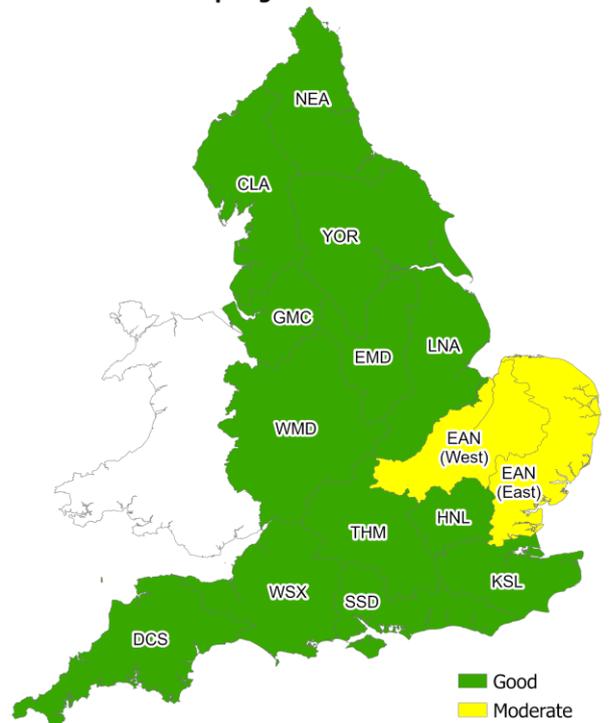
Water resources situation

The 2025 drought had significant impacts on water resources and the agriculture sector. The wet weather through the autumn and winter has improved the water resources position and in some cases, there is too much water with flooding providing another challenge to farmers. Rivers, reservoirs and groundwater sufficiently recharged and returned to normal levels for the time of year.

Overall rainfall between November 2025 to January 2026 for England was 137% of the long term average (LTA) and most areas in England received normal to above average rainfall over the 3-month cumulative period. Central England received the highest rainfall during this period with 159% of the LTA which was the wettest for that period since 1929/30. While Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire had the wettest November to January period on record.

January saw some very wet conditions particularly across southern and southwest England. Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly area received its wettest January on record. However,

Figure 1 - Initial irrigation Prospects spring-summer 2026



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in contrast, Cumbria and Lancashire area experienced some drier conditions, only receiving 78% of LTA rainfall during January.

February has continued to be wet with England receiving 147% average rainfall in the first 24 days of the month. With four days to go the north-west has received average rainfall while central England has received 185% LTA rainfall.

Soils remain saturated across England with all geo-regions wetter than would be expected at this point in the year.

River flows have responded to the wet conditions over the autumn and winter. As of 24 February, all nationally reported sites are normal or higher for the time of year. River flows, from a couple of groundwater dominated catchments in central southern England, are exceptionally high for the time of year, with most other sites above normal for the time of year.

Groundwater levels have responded to the wet autumn and winter and have recovered to normal or above levels for the time of year across all aquifers except for those in north-west Norfolk. Groundwater levels are now rising here and throughout East Anglia, elsewhere across central southern England many groundwater flood warnings remain in place.

More information on the current water situation is available at [Water situation reports for England - GOV.UK](#)

Long range weather forecast

After an unsettled end of February, the weather is expected to become drier as we move into March with high pressure likely to become dominate for a time. The second half of March is likely to see a return of Atlantic frontal systems spreading across the country, interspersed with drier and brighter interludes.

More information on weather forecasts is available at the Met Office. The Met Office [3 month](#) forecast is now available

Irrigation Reservoirs

Most abstractors have sufficiently recharged irrigation reservoirs over the winter ahead of this year irrigation season. However, there are some abstractors in eastern parts of the country that have only able been able to partially refill reservoirs. This is due to hands off flow conditions in force on some abstraction licences over the winter, where river flows in local catchments have been below normal for the time of year as they missed the rainfall. Recent rainfall has helped.

Mark Betson, the National Farmers Union Water Resources Specialist commented:

“The recent wet weather has relieved a lot of abstractors who are attempting to refill winter reservoirs but, even with most restrictions lifted, some abstractors had to start refilling late and may be behind. We are keen for abstractors to take the opportunity to access water while it is available,

customer service line
03708 506 506

incident hotline
0800 80 70 60

floodline
03459 88 11 88

but if they have concerns about getting to the level they would expect to be at by the end of the season, they should talk to their local Environment Agency team about options. Although it has been wet, we will not go into 2026 with the same level of resilience that we came into 2025 with, and if the weather turns dry again, there may be more pressure on reservoir water to support irrigation, so utilising as much storage as possible now could become important.”

Support for abstractors

Despite the improved water resources situation, impacts from dry conditions can progress quickly as experienced in the spring of 2025, so it is important that the sector review their water needs and consider the range of support that is available to help secure and increase water resilience.

Short term options

- Contact the Environment Agency as soon as possible if you do not think you will be able to comply with the conditions of your abstraction licence.
- Review abstraction licences to ensure that they still meet their needs to comply with conditions and meet future requirements.
- Engage and communicate with customers to give them early information on quality/yield implications.
- Take advantage of significant rainfall events when flows/levels rise above hands off levels allowing a return to abstraction.
- Short term options are available to improve your access to water outside of your licence conditions. Further information can be found in the Environment Agency guidance [water abstraction during prolonged dry weather and drought](#). The Environment Agency will talk to you about short-term options for improving your access to water outside the conditions of your licence.
- There is an Environment Agency [Regulatory Position Statement](#) available that covers information on when you can abstract water outside of the conditions of your abstraction licence during a flood warning.
- [Sign up to managing your water abstraction or impoundment licence online](#). This will allow you to submit abstraction returns and view your licence information. Licence holders also have access to water abstraction alerts by email ‘e-alerts’.
- 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.
- Consider trading water with other licence holders to improve access to water supplies. Further guidance can be found on [gov.uk](#) which includes a link to Help for Water Rights Trading Data and further link to a [water rights trading map](#)

Long term resilience

- Review plans for longer term investment such as reservoirs for future resilience and securing additional backup storage for livestock where farms are on mains water or boreholes. Farmers should take advantage of [future funding](#) rounds from the RPA to help fund this investment

- Consider applying for future Local Resource Option screening study with growers in your area to increase longer-term water supply resilience.
- Consider joining or establishing a Water Abstractor Groups (WAGs) to work together to understand and jointly plan for future water needs. A guidance document is available to farmers to help setup Water Abstractor Groups at [WAG book - UKIA Irrigation](#)

Prospects for individual areas

Area	Prospects for Summer 2025 irrigation season
Environment Agency Cumbria and Lancashire	Good
Environment Agency Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly	Good
Environment Agency East Anglia East (covering Essex Norfolk and Suffolk)	Moderate
Environment Agency East Anglia West (covering Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire)	Moderate
Environment Agency East Midlands	Good
Environment Agency Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire	Good
Environment Agency Hertfordshire and North London	Good
Environment Agency Kent, South London and East Sussex	Good
Environment Agency Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire	Good
Environment Agency North East	Good
Environment Agency Solent and South Downs	Good
Environment Agency Thames	Good
Environment Agency Wessex	Good
Environment Agency West Midlands	Good
Environment Agency Yorkshire	Good

Where area prospects are predicted to **Moderate** or **Poor**, a full forecast can be found below.

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Environment Agency – East Anglia East

Forward Look

For the eastern side of East Anglia, there's no strong indication that water conditions will differ from what's typical for this time of year so our general advice is that prospects for irrigation are currently **MODERATE** but expected to improve to a status of **GOOD** for all areas for the 2026 season with continued rainfall through March and April.

The slow recovery of chalk levels in North Norfolk rivers suggests a slightly less favourable situation but not sufficient to merit a designation of poor. The recovery of the Essex chalk could imply a current designation of good, but this will require steady continued recovery into the spring due to the sensitivity of some catchments. It is likely the prospects will continue to improve with further recharge of groundwater.

Rainfall and Soil Moisture Deficit

Autumn of 2025 was wetter than average across much of the area, recording between 110% and 150% of long-term average rainfall. The North Norfolk coastal catchments were slightly drier recording normal or just below normal rainfall.

By mid-February, winter rainfall accumulations were between 140-185 mm (120% to 160% L.T.A), with slightly more recorded in the eastern coastal catchments and slightly less in the extreme north and south.

The wetter than average conditions resulted in an early reduction in the soil moisture deficit with notable river responses to rainfall by mid-November. Currently ground conditions remain saturated, and we can expect a further response to rainfall and a steady recovery of groundwater levels.

River Flows

Current groundwater levels don't always give a reliable picture of what summer river flows will be like. A very dry spring can cause rivers fed mainly by surface water to drop quickly, especially in inland catchments south of and including the Waveney. Farmers using these rivers can generally expect a normal, restriction-free irrigation season, but an extreme heatwave or very dry spring could still push flows low enough to trigger Section 57 restrictions.

Some catchments have such high summer irrigation demand that it can exceed the natural summer baseflow even when groundwater is at normal levels. In those places, local abstraction may need to be limited to protect the environment, even if the area is not officially in drought.

After strong groundwater recovery this autumn, the chance of restrictions in the most vulnerable, heavily used rivers is very low (under 5%).

Groundwater

The wet conditions this winter have resulted in a widespread recovery to normal levels. Local exceptions are the stronger recovery from mid Essex to South Suffolk where levels are now above normal and the North Norfolk chalk which remains slightly below (although it should be noted that the Norfolk chalk rivers are naturally slower to recover). It is expected levels will continue to recover into March.

Environment Agency – East Anglia West

Forward look

Summer irrigation prospects in East Anglia (West) are moderate, with groundwater likely to be normal or below normal without further sustained rainfall. Northwest Norfolk is expected to remain notably low.

River flows for groundwater dominated catchments under normal rainfall conditions are likely to be below normal this spring, with a possibility to recover to normal conditions during the summer. However, if there are dry conditions, spring flows are expected to be below normal and could reach notably low levels at the end of summer. This would require management actions using existing licence conditions, particularly the case for the catchments in the northwest Norfolk area and Fenland IDB-drained areas

Rainfall and Soil Moisture Deficit

The area has received above average rainfall (118% LTA) during the autumn and winter so far. This rainfall was received after a very dry spring-summer (52% LTA). Initially the rainfall reduced the exceptionally high Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD) caused by the dry spring-summer season and recharge season started one or two months later in December, depending on the catchment. Current SMD is within normal values.

River Flows

River flows at the end of the summer ranged from below normal to exceptionally low and with the autumn-winter rainfall they have recovered to normal range, except for the Northwest Norfolk catchments where flows are still below normal.

Groundwater

The groundwater recharge season started one or two months later than normal due to the high soil moisture deficit that the autumn-winter rainfall needed to overcome. Recharge started in November in the south-west catchments and in December in the north-east catchments. At the end of January half of groundwater sites have recovered to normal levels or above, and the other half are in below normal or notably low levels. In general groundwater levels are lower than those in recent years, with the lowest levels in the northwest Norfolk catchments.

Definitions

Prospects for spray irrigation are defined as 'Good', 'Moderate' or 'Poor'.

Good Water levels are average or above average and supplies are expected to be safe. There is a possibility of minor local controls on abstraction from surface water in late summer if the weather is exceptionally hot and dry.

- Moderate** Water levels are low. Some controls on surface water abstraction are possible by midsummer if the weather is hot and dry. Controls on abstraction from groundwater are possible in small, sensitive groundwater areas.
- Poor** Water levels are well below average. Soil moisture deficit is developing early and significant restrictions on abstraction from surface and groundwater are probable.

An updated irrigation report will be published at the end of April, where we will reflect any changes in the water resources situation and irrigation prospects.