

Prospects for refilling of agriculture storage reservoirs this winter

This report reviews the prospects for the refilling of agriculture storage reservoirs this winter using a range of long-term average rainfall scenarios. It explores the risks for the sector in the event of a dry winter and actions farmers and growers can take to reduce the impacts from drought continuing into the spring.

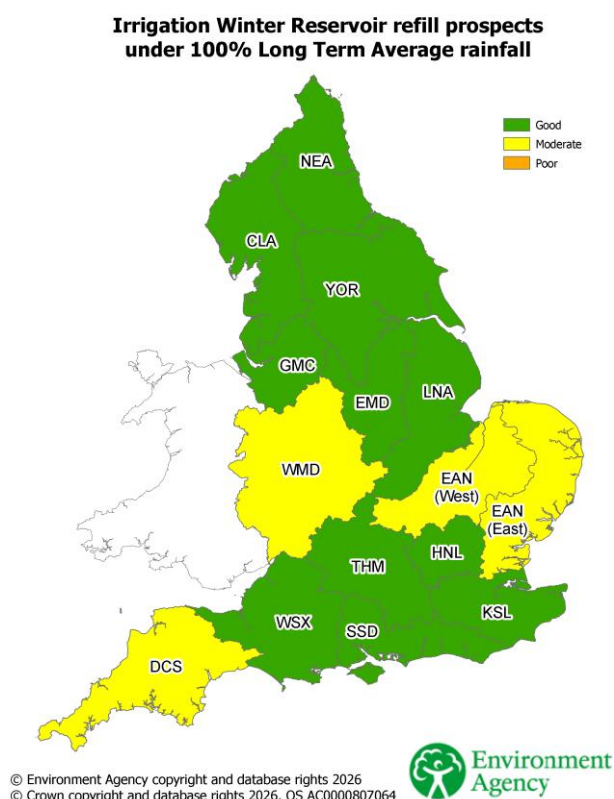
1. Winter refill prospects

The impact of this year's drought on agriculture has been significant. The drought and successive heatwaves this year have created challenging growing and harvesting conditions, resulting in a difficult season for farmers. This has resulted in lower yields and reduced crop quality across many parts of the country. Poor grass growth during the summer meant that many livestock farmers had to use winter forage reserves earlier than planned, leaving reduced supplies available for the winter months. The impacts of this year's drought continue to be felt, with many storage reservoirs remaining at low levels and some river flows are still below normal for the time of year, limiting the ability for abstractors to refill storage reservoirs.

This winter will be critical for the replenishment of storage reservoirs and for rebuilding resilience ahead of the 2027 growing season. The extent to which reservoirs refill over the winter period will influence water availability for irrigation and the sector's ability to withstand further dry conditions next year.

This section examines the prospects for reservoir refill under a range of winter rainfall scenarios. It considers outcomes based on winter rainfall (November to March) under 100%, 80%, and 60% of the long-term average across each of the Environment Agency geographic areas.

1.1 – 100% long-term average rainfall scenario

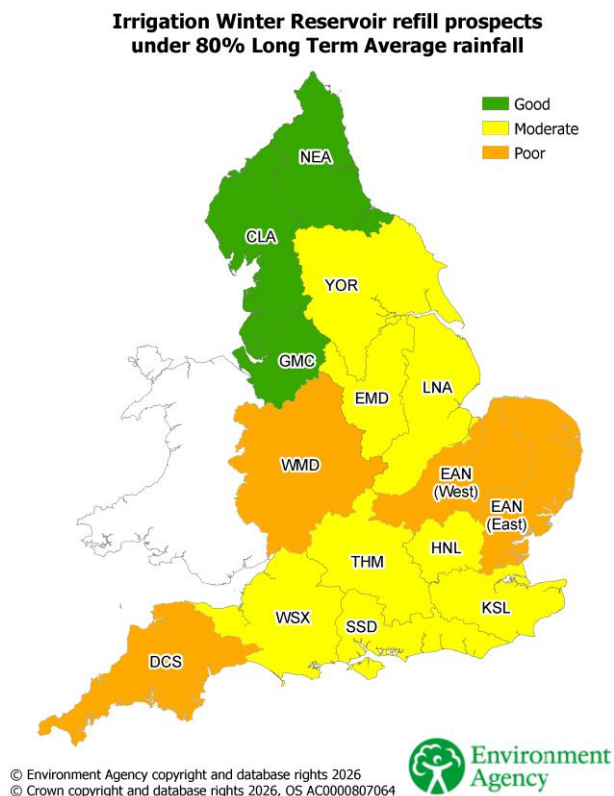


Under this scenario, reservoir refill prospects are generally expected to be good across most of England, with the majority of storage reservoirs projected to refill sufficiently ahead of the spring.

However, where river flows and groundwater levels remain below normal throughout the winter, there is a risk that local abstraction restrictions may be required. These restrictions could limit opportunities for abstractors to refill storage reservoirs, reducing water availability for the following irrigation season.

Projections indicate moderate refill prospects in the West Midlands, Devon, Cornwall and East Anglia. In these locations, there is a greater risk that storage reservoirs may not fully refill by the start of the spring, particularly where there is a delay in the recovery of baseline river flows and groundwater. Consequently, some irrigators may enter the 2027 growing season with reduced water storage and lower resilience to further dry conditions.

1.2 – 80% long-term average rainfall scenario



Under this scenario, there is an increased risk that winter recharge will be insufficient to fully replenish storage reservoirs before the start of the 2027 irrigation season:

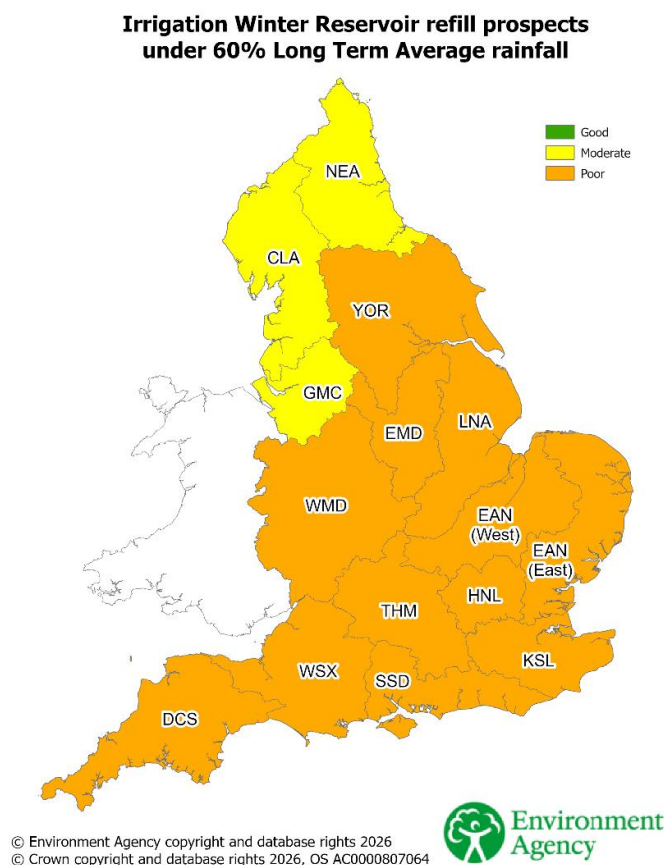
- Moderate risk across southern, central and eastern England.
- Poor risk in West Midlands, Devon, Cornwall, and East Anglia. In these areas, more significant abstraction restrictions may be required if groundwater and river flow recovery remains limited over the winter.

Under an 80% winter rainfall scenario, there is an increased likelihood that Section 57 restrictions may be needed in some catchments during the 2027 irrigation season, particularly where river flows remain significantly below average.

Section 57 restrictions are emergency powers used to restrict spray irrigation abstraction when water resources are under severe pressure. They form part of a phased approach to managing abstraction during a drought to protect the environment. The Environment Agency and farmers work together to avoid such restrictions.

The likelihood, extent and timing of any Section 57 restrictions will depend on winter recharge and hydrological conditions through the irrigation season. A more detailed assessment of the potential need for such restrictions will be provided in the next Spray Irrigation Prospects report, to be published in February.

1.3 – 60% long-term average rainfall scenario



Under this scenario, prospects for the refill of storage reservoirs are expected to be poor across many parts of the country with widespread impacts.

Winter hands-off flow restrictions on licences are expected to be widespread, as river flows and groundwater levels are projected to remain well below normal for the time of year. These conditions are likely to significantly limit opportunities for winter abstraction and reservoir recharge across many areas. More information on river flow and groundwater projections up to March 2027 can be found in on our [National Water Situation Report](#).

By the start of spring, many storage reservoirs are unlikely to have refilled sufficiently to meet irrigation demands for the growing season. As a result, resilience is likely to be significantly reduced, with conditions expected to be worse than those experienced at the start of spring 2026.

Hands-off flow restrictions are also likely to remain in place into the spring, affecting direct spray irrigation abstractions. With soils unlikely to have fully wetted over the winter, conditions for the establishment of spring-sown crops could be particularly challenging. Vegetable producers may face additional pressures from reduced water availability. There

will be significant risk of Section 57 restrictions being implemented during the spring, particularly where rivers flows and groundwater are well below normal. Expectation will include outright bans at some stage through the season.

Low rainfall could have significant impacts on livestock farmers by reducing spring grass growth and limiting opportunities to rebuild forage stocks ahead of the next grazing season. Following this year's drought, many livestock producers have already experienced lower forage yields and have had to draw on winter feed reserves earlier than usual. Consequently, forage availability may be more constrained than normal, increasing the risk of feed shortages and potentially driving up costs should dry conditions continue into the spring.

2. Water Resources situation

September was the third consecutive month of below average rainfall for England which recorded 65% of long-term average (LTA) rainfall for the month. To the 24 October, England overall has received 99% of the LTA rainfall. There were some regional variations with the north-east receiving 91% of LTA rainfall, while the south-east received 107% of LTA rainfall to the 24 October.

Recent rainfall has helped increase some river flows at three-quarters of monitoring sites. Just under half of monitoring sites are classed as normal for the time of year. The rest of monitoring sites are below normal or lower, many of which are in south-east and south-west England. Four sites are classed as exceptionally low including the Ely Ouse in east England, the Rivers Derwent and Swale in the north-east and the River Tone in south-west England. With river flows remaining below normal or lower in many parts of England, opportunities for farmers to abstract water are limited and this further increases pressures on the agriculture sector.

At the end of September, soils were much drier than would be expected across most of England, with particularly dry soils along the south coast, in south Wales and in the far north-east of England. In north-west England, soil moisture deficits are closer to average, with some near the Scottish border now wetter than would be expected for the time of year.

Groundwater levels continue to decline at many sites, as soils need to be saturated before rainfall can effectively recharge resources. Sites in chalk aquifers are all normal or lower for the time of year, with three sites in southern England classed as exceptionally low.

This year has seen significant demands on agriculture storage reservoirs due to the early start to the irrigation season and widespread abstraction restrictions that were in force during the summer. As a result, reservoir levels in some areas have fallen to record lows ahead of the winter recharge season. It will therefore be crucial that reservoirs are sufficiently replenished over the winter to secure water supplies for the 2027 irrigation season.

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

3. Long range weather forecast

For the end of October, conditions are likely to become less unsettled with rain and stronger winds becoming more confined to northwestern areas. Into early in November high pressure will become more dominant bringing more settled conditions across the country with the potential for fog and frost overnight.

Into mid-November, there is an increased chance of a more unsettled weather with more frequent spells of rain for many areas. However, confidence is lower further into the forecast period due to uncertainty in the development and track of weather systems.

More information on long range weather forecasts is available at the [Met Office](#).

4. Actions by the agriculture sector to reduce the impacts of a dry winter and drought in spring 2027

We advise farmers and growers to review their water requirements now in preparation for the next growing season, particularly where crops require significant volumes for irrigation.

With increasing pressure on water resources, access to water cannot always be guaranteed in the future. It is vital that the sector seek to take actions to improve both short-term and long-term resilience to drought.

Mark Betson, Water Resources Specialist at the National Farmers Union, highlighted the importance of planning ahead to ensure future water needs can be met and businesses remain resilient in the face of increasing climate and water resource pressures.

'The exceptional summer of 2026 has created a water deficit which will be difficult to make up over the winter. The clear message is that we have to be prepared for higher risks going into 2027 with any dry weather we experience. For those with the ability to store water, accessing water when it is available will be important as there is no guarantee it will be available later in the season, or there will be additional flexibility with licencing.'

'There has been a lot of work with the Environment Agency to boost local communications with abstractors this year and where particular areas are encountering problems with refilling storage, they should talk to their local Environment Agency teams. We have also seen a growth in water abstractor groups as networks of local growers are more empowered to engage with water planning and providing farmer-to-farmer support. We continue to advocate for more abstractors to think about starting or joining groups to benefit from this support.'

4.1 Short term support and actions

We advise farmers and growers to consider the following actions and support measures to help increase resilience over this winter and in the long term.

- **Manage and review of abstraction licences**

Review abstraction licences to ensure that they still meet their needs to comply with conditions and meet future requirements. Short term options are available to improve your access to water outside of your licence conditions and we strongly recommend you contact the Environment Agency as early as possible to discuss your requirements. Further information can be found in the Environment Agency guidance [water abstraction during prolonged dry weather and drought](#).

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' which speeds up the process of receiving notifications.

- **Regulatory Position Statements**

Environment Agency Regulatory Position Statements are available to support with short term access to water.

[Abstraction outside the authorised period for filling water storage reservoirs: RPS 382 - GOV.UK](#) allows the abstraction of water outside the authorised abstraction period for the purpose of filling existing water storage reservoirs from 1- 31 October. We will assess the drought situation later in the winter and communicate information on any further extensions to the refill season in our spring irrigation prospects report.

[Abstracting floodwater outside of licence conditions during flood events: RPS 300 - GOV.UK](#) covers information on when abstractors can take water outside of abstraction licence conditions during a flood or severe flood warning. Farmers should be ready to take water during any high flow events to maximise the fill of on farm reservoirs.

- **Trading water rights**

Consider trading water with other licence holders to improve access to water supplies. You can find out more about trading water rights on gov.uk or find abstractors with potential for trade on our [water rights trading map](#)

4.2 Long term support and actions

The Prime Minister [announced a new round](#) of the Water Management Grant on 15th August, with up to £15m available to help farmers build on-farm reservoirs.

The grant will be designed to support construction on on-farm reservoirs, to store water when it available for when it is needed, improving resilience during dry periods and helping protect crop production. The scheme will focus on supporting water storage for crop

irrigation, helping the horticulture and arable sectors adapt to climate change and improve resilience to drought. Defra will be releasing details in the Autumn on grant structure and application process.

Read more about how to develop an on-farm reservoir with these two booklets developed this year. Content is applicable throughout England, but case studies are focussed on the [East of England](#) and [Essex and Suffolk natural landscapes](#).

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 booklets which explain how they might support abstractors and how to form a new group.

An updated irrigation prospect report will be published at the end of February, where we will reflect any changes in the drought situation and key risks ahead of the Spring.

Definitions

Prospects for winter refill prospects are defined as 'Good', 'Moderate' or 'Poor'.

Good	Water resources are average or above. There is a possibility of minor local controls on abstraction from surface water but water resources is expected to be in a good position by the spring and most irrigation reservoirs refilled.
Moderate	Water resources are below average. Some controls on surface water abstraction are possible if rainfall is below average into the autumn and winter. Controls on abstraction from groundwater are possible in sensitive areas or where there has been insufficient groundwater recharge. Some irrigation reservoirs may not be completed refilled and irrigation may be at risk ahead of the spring.
Poor	Water resources are well below average. Wider restrictions on abstraction from surface and groundwater are likely especially where there has been limited recharge. There is a high risk that irrigation reservoirs may not be sufficiently refilled by the spring and will likely impact on resilience for next year irrigation season.