

DROUGHT THE DRY FACTS



River Darent



NRA

*National Rivers Authority
Southern Region*

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March 1992



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Guardians of
the Water Environment

Introduction

The South East of England is now well into its fourth year of drought with no immediate prospect of an end in sight.

In almost every part of Southern Region, the autumn and the early winter of 1991/92 were the driest such period since records began a century ago.

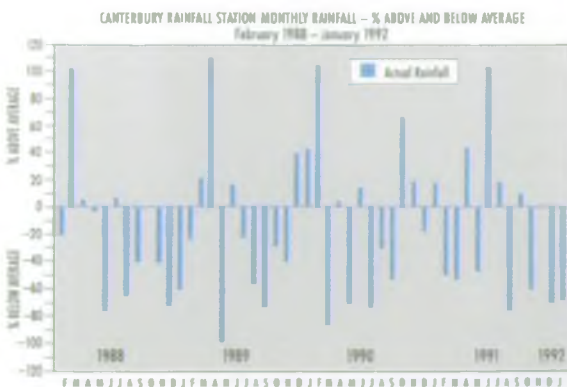
In order to safeguard our rivers and underground water reserves, the National Rivers Authority is seeking the support of all water users. Careful management and commitment to a long term water resources strategy is vital to conserve natural reserves of water through this drought and for future generations.

The Drought

The current drought began in Southern Region in 1988 when, after a dry summer, only 46% of normal rainfall fell between November 1988 and February 1989. This was followed by an exceptionally hot summer, creating a very high demand.

Each following year, winter rainfall has failed to fully restore the underground water reserves which are the source of three-quarters of public water supplies in this Region.

Since the drought started, Kent has missed the equivalent of 10 months rainfall and Sussex and Hampshire have lost 7 months rainfall.



Southern Region has been particularly badly affected, not only because it lies in the rainshadow of higher land to the West, but because the high population density results in a high demand for water.



The past year

1991 was one of the driest years this century. August 1991 to January 1992 broke all drought records for similar periods. December and January witnessed a quarter of normal rainfall and in February, rainfall was only between a third and three-quarters of normal.

River flows have fallen to less than those of the dry winter of 1975/6. Reservoirs which were between 60% and 95% full at the end of January have begun to fall again. In Hampshire, the River Itchen is experiencing its lowest ever winter flows. In Kent, groundwater levels are at the lowest recorded for this time of the year and are still falling.

The year ahead

Prospects for the coming year now look bleak, especially in Kent and the more eastern parts of the Region where groundwater reserves are particularly low.

There is now no realistic prospect of sufficient rainfall to restore underground and reservoir water reserves before the summer of 1992. Once temperatures rise, plants and trees begin to grow and the soil dries. Most rain that falls returns to the atmosphere before it can replenish natural and man-made reserves.

The chalk streams of Hampshire, whose summer flows derive from winter rainfall, can be expected to experience low levels through the summer with higher than normal temperatures and changes in patterns of weed growth.

What can be done?

In Hampshire, it is now almost certain that the NRA will need to pump underground water from its Candover and Alre schemes into the River Itchen to boost river flows and to preserve water quality as it flows through urban areas.

In areas where farmers rely on water for their crops, special arrangements will have to be agreed to balance the needs of crops with those of the rivers and wetlands. The NRA is liaising closely with farming organisations.

The NRA has a well established drought liaison group with local water companies in the East of the Region to maximise the use of precious reserves and to ensure their sensible use.

Everyone can help. The National Rivers Authority is seeking the support of all water users, whether in the home, in the garden, on farms or in industry, to save water to help our rivers survive.