

# NZET Committee Enquiry: Water Scarcity and Drought Preparedness



## Water Scarcity and Drought Preparedness

On 4 June 2025 the Scottish Parliament Net Zero, Transport and Energy Committee Convenor wrote to SEPA enquiring about our preparedness for drought conditions and the actions already taken and are considering taking to address the situation.

SEPA has set out how it will look to drier periods in the future through [Scotland's National Water Scarcity Plan](#). The water scarcity plan will allow us to manage water resources in dry periods and contribute to the joined up approach set out in the river basin management plans.

SEPA publishes [water scarcity levels](#) every Thursday from May to September, which is the critical period for monitoring drought conditions. Categorising 47 regions according to a five-tier approach, from normal conditions to significant scarcity. Currently, 10 areas are at moderate scarcity. The river areas most at risk are all located in the East of Scotland, with the Wick and Thurso catchment most at risk of significant scarcity. Rivers with prolonged low flows are in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire as well as Lothian area.

SEPA is pleased to provide the following information relative to the questions posed by the committee.

## Committee Questions

**1. SEPA's winter water situation report 2025 identified drier than normal conditions in autumn and winter with potential increased risk of water scarcity in the spring/summer. What actions were taken in response to this report and how did SEPA, the Scottish Government and Scottish Water coordinate work to prepare for the increased risk of water scarcity?**

SEPA prepares water scarcity reports in December and March, and this year our weekly water scarcity reporting began in April. These reports analyse information on rainfall, river flows, groundwater and loch levels to provide a summary of water resource conditions.

After publishing the winter water situation report, SEPA communicated the potential risk of water scarcity to key business sectors which rely on water abstraction from rivers and lochs, and set

up coordination groups on water scarcity in April 2025 to deliver the response to potential water scarcity.

Since then, SEPA, Scottish Government, Scottish Water and NatureScot have met weekly to coordinate and deliver work to prepare for water scarcity, with SEPA chairing these meetings. SEPA's role on water scarcity is to protect the environment, and we do this by providing water scarcity reports and data, giving advice and information to those who abstract water directly from surface waters, and taking regulatory action to restrict abstraction during periods of significant water scarcity. Scottish Water monitors and provides information on drinking water resources, and implements planned actions where needed to ensure maintenance of the public water supply. Scottish Water has also communicated to encourage water saving measures, which aligns with SEPA's messaging on water scarcity levels, and the need to manage water resources carefully. Scottish Government has a policy and legislative framework to enable a balance to be struck between protecting public water supplies, the water environment and other users during periods of prolonged dry weather.

## **2. What actions are you considering taking should drought conditions worsen over the summer?**

SEPA's approach to water scarcity is set out in Scotland's National Water Scarcity Plan – ([scotland-s national water scarcity plan v12.docx](#)). When the water environment is under pressure, SEPA must balance the need for sustainable water use while protecting the environment. SEPA regulates abstractions from the water environment under the Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011 (CAR), and this allows for temporary action to be taken to protect the water environment during emergency situations such as significant water scarcity.

The SEPA water scarcity reports use a hierarchy of water scarcity levels, ranging from normal to significant water scarcity level. Once an area moves from Early Warning to Alert level, SEPA communicates directly with licenced abstractors with advice on efficient use of water, which can help to prolong the available water resource within a catchment. We advise abstractors to plan ahead and increase their resilience to the impacts of sustained dry conditions. As water scarcity

levels increase, we will engage directly with licenced abstractors to provide targeted advice and information. So far in 2025, SEPA has contacted over 470 agricultural licence holders to discuss their water use, and the implications of potential significant water scarcity.

If conditions reach Significant Scarcity, then SEPA can take temporary action to suspend or vary abstraction licences. These restrictions will be removed as soon as flow levels recover sufficiently. At present there are no such restrictions on water use, but SEPA's weekly water scarcity reports will provide updates on areas which reach Significant water scarcity.

### **3. What formal and informal structures are in place to ensure effective communication with Scottish Water, and are these sufficient?**

As mentioned in Question 1, SEPA initiates and chairs a weekly national water scarcity call with representatives of Scottish Water, Scottish Government and NatureScot. This year, these meetings have run since late April, and will continue until water scarcity levels return to normal. These meetings ensure effective communication about water scarcity levels, storage levels in water supply reservoirs, and SEPA and Scottish Water operational response to water scarcity. SEPA also liaises with Scottish Water communications staff.

During a prolonged period of dry weather, policy and legislative frameworks are in place to ensure escalation and a coordinated response.

### **4. How is SEPA working with Local Authorities to identify private water supply users most at risk of water scarcity and mitigate against potential impacts?**

Local authorities are the main source of contact for reporting problems with a private water supply. Local authorities provide an update to SEPA which includes information on supplies that have issues due to water scarcity. SEPA collate this information which helps assess water scarcity stress in an area. This is used as evidence when calculating the overall level of water scarcity in a region. SEPA's weekly water scarcity report summarising the water scarcity risk in a region can be a useful warning for private water supplier users.

**5. What communication has SEPA had with the agriculture sector and any other groups (demographic, sectoral or geographic) that appear to you to be vulnerable to the impacts of water scarcity on their preparedness for drought over the summer?**

Since March, when SEPA published their first report after winter, we have generated well over 450 articles and broadcast pieces. Our approach includes proactively sharing pre-recorded audio clips for broadcasters to download directly for use in news bulletins and packages, alongside more traditional interview formats. SEPA are working with partners to share messaging, for example the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on risk of wildfire, and Scottish Water consumer advice. The water scarcity messages have also been widely shared with key membership organisations including NFUS, the Scotch Whisky Association and Fisheries Management Scotland. SEPA also share updates to all MSPs and MPs and over 100 key contacts from local authorities and the national parks.

In addition, SEPA has had ongoing communications and discussion with the National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS) to ensure they are raising the concerns over water scarcity with their members. SEPA has updated the NFUS policy team and local NFUS representatives on the water scarcity concern for the coming summer season.

SEPA National Rural Unit staff have had telephone conversations with agricultural abstractors regarding 470 licences since the middle of May and are continuing to make calls to operators regarding the remaining licences. The focus of these calls is to advise the operators of the implications on their abstraction volumes should the catchment enter significant water scarcity. These calls give SEPA the opportunity to better understand the business operations, and the impact that suspension or variation of abstractions will have on the crop and their livelihood. SEPA staff also take the opportunity to discuss building water resilience within the operator's business by discussing water storage ponds, use of better irrigation equipment, abstraction and irrigation time, working collaboratively with other in the catchment and use of more efficient irrigation techniques.

For non-agricultural abstractions, we have engaged with sector representatives such as the Scotch Whisky Association, Scottish Golf and Scottish Canals, and SEPA staff are now making calls to non-agricultural licence holders, similar to those outlined above for agricultural businesses. This will provide further information on the impacts of water scarcity and identify where work is needed to improve resilience during prolonged dry periods.

**6. How are you feeding lessons learned from this year's water scarcity and considering the increased risk of extreme weather conditions from climate change into the Scottish Government's review of water industry policy, which was committed to in the 2023-24 Programme for Government?**

We are working closely with the Scottish Government and Scottish Water to support the development of a long-term resilient framework for managing Scotland's water resources, that ensures it is adapted to the challenges of a changing climate. SEPA support the proposed policy changes that would mean planning ahead to better understand and manage our current and future demands on water resources. We will ensure we incorporate any lessons learned from this year's water scarcity event, and any prior ones, into the proposed review to ensure it sets out clear recommendations for managing Scotland's water resources in a sustainable manner.

END

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