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27 June 2023

Dear Convenor,

I am writing to provide you with the latest update on the current water scarcity situation across Scotland.

Scientific evidence shows that warmer and drier summers are more likely in Scotland as a result of climate change. Following a very dry spring and the recent prolonged dry period water levels in rivers and reservoirs are much lower than usual for the time of year. Whilst there is some rain in the forecast there are significant deficits and therefore water scarcity could become more severe and have widespread impacts.

The latest water scarcity report from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), issued 23 June 2023, highlighted that the Loch Maree area and part of the Esk area of Dumfriesshire were experiencing Significant levels of water scarcity. At Significant, SEPA may need to temporarily suspend or vary abstraction licences to prevent long-term harm to the water environment. In practice, this has not been necessary in Loch Maree or the Esk as the environmental impact of activity there is minimal. The current situation is constantly evolving, however, and if there is no recovery in river levels over the coming weeks, more areas in Scotland will move into Significant levels of water scarcity.

The 2022 Programme for Government committed Scottish Government to working with SEPA, abstractors and others to build on the lessons from last summer and ensure the right strategic approach to scarcity was in place for this year. A key lesson was the importance of an early ramp up in proactive communications to engage businesses on planning ahead, and provide practical advice on steps they could take to minimise the impact - such as collaborating with their neighbours on managing water use and checking equipment for leaks. SEPA's full communications campaign began at the start of May and a communications stakeholder group involving Scottish Government, Scottish Water and NFUS was stood up to coordinate messaging.

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Building on feedback from last year, there has also been close partnership with the Scottish Government sponsored Farm Advisory Service, strengthening engagement on the ground.

Building on experience from last year, SEPA has also formalised the system through which available water resources are shared out in areas of significant scarcity. Abstractors therefore know in advance the framework that will be applied and can prepare accordingly. SEPA is also following up with individual license holders on what this framework means for them.

Reservoirs that provide water for public water supplies are currently, on average, 74% full. This is some 12% lower than what would be expected at this time of year. Scottish Water has well-developed drought plans and has put these in place to ensure that public supplies are maintained. Investment in resilience measures over many years means that Scottish Water has ensured that supplies have been maintained through prolonged dry periods in recent year. However, should dry and warm conditions persist through the summer, there may be need to take further action. It is therefore important that everyone uses water responsibly by restricting the use of water in gardens, washing cars etc. I can reassure you that water levels and water consumption are being monitored very carefully across Scotland by Government.

Members will have noted press reports relating to the water supply at Broadford on Skye. Following a very rapid decline in the water levels in the Allt a'Mhuillinn burn used for public supplies, emergency action was required by the Scottish Government and Scottish Water to secure and maintain water supplies. I can provide reassurance that supplies are being monitored very carefully and water supplies are operating normally.

Three per cent of Scotland's population obtains water from private water supplies (ones that are not owned or operated by Scottish Water). Numerous supplies across Scotland have run dry as a consequence of water scarcity. We have also reopened the Scottish Government-funded emergency bottled water scheme for private water supply households affected by shortages. Officials are liaising with local authorities to ensure proactive and localised communications are taking place in order to support those affected. Please note that special measures are in place to support vulnerable households.

I can provide reassurance that the Scottish Government is working closely with its partner agencies – SEPA and Scottish Water – to ensure that water supplies across Scotland are being monitored very carefully in accordance with the National Water Scarcity Plan. It should also be noted that public water supplies are largely operating normally.

With this in mind, please find enclosed a short update on the current water scarcity situation.

Yours sincerely,

MAIRI MCALLAN MSP

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Annex A – Water Scarcity Summer 2023

Current Situation

- All of Scotland is now affected by water scarcity, from Shetland to the Borders. [SEPA's latest water scarcity report](#) shows that part of the Esk area of Dumfriesshire and the Loch Maree area are at Significant level for water scarcity, the southwest and much of central Scotland are at Moderate level for water scarcity, and the majority of the rest of Scotland remains at Alert level for water scarcity.
- The Met have confirmed that rainfall totals for June to date are still broadly below normal expectations, and follow a drier than average spring. There is a slightly increased chance of rain over the coming weeks, especially across western Scotland. However the extent of this remains uncertain.
- [Scotland's National Water Scarcity Plan \(NWSP\)](#), published in 2014 and updated in 2020 following consultation, is intended to protect the water environment at a catchment level and to ensure the continued viability of key water supplies. The NWSP explains how water resources will be managed prior to and during periods of prolonged dry weather.
- SEPA is responsible for regulating water abstractions in Scotland's rivers under the [Water Environment \(Controlled Activities\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2011](#). Where areas of the country experience prolonged dry periods and reach significant water scarcity level then temporary suspension of authorisations to abstract in relevant catchments is one of the actions from the indicative hierarchy of actions that SEPA may choose to consider to protect the environment.
- Based on current rainfall forecast it is likely that SEPA will need to temporarily suspend abstractions of water from the environment in a number of areas.
- In June 2023 SEPA published [guidance](#) which clarifies how they will apply the NWSP where abstractions have limited cumulative environmental impact:
 - Drinking water supplies (including private drinking water abstractions).
 - Groundwater abstractions.
 - Abstractions where the cumulative abstraction is no more than 5% of Qn95 (the flow normally exceeded 95% of the time)
- The June 2023 guidance, will be applied by SEPA and communicated to each operator on a case-by-cases basis, as part of determining whether an exclusion is applicable to their abstraction.
- SEPA's informal assessment of the impact of rainfall seen in parts of Scotland over recent days is that it will have reduced the need for irrigation in some areas, but will not have significantly impacted water levels.
- There is no immediate danger to public water supplies. However, everyone needs to use water responsibly, and the Scottish Government urge everyone to follow the guidance from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and Scottish Water and [use water efficiently](#).
- Across the country Scottish Water are experiencing extremely elevated levels of demand, with most Water Treatment Works running flat out to keep up with demand and 34 tankers out maintaining supply. Overall reservoirs have 74% supply - close monitoring is being done on vulnerable sites that might need additional measures to maintain supplies.

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- It is not possible to give an accurate number of households dependent on private water supplies which have no drinking water. This is because many households will take their own action rather than seek help from Local Authorities. Officials are in touch with all Local Authorities to remind them to do proactive communications around the scheme to ensure that help is provided to those households that require it.
- So far Scottish Water has delivered 92 pallets of water to Local Authorities – equivalent of 88,230 litres. Further deliveries are expected.
- All MSPs were invited to attend a water scarcity factual briefing which took place on 20/06/2023. The aim of this session was to ensure that MSPs have the latest information about the situation on the ground, and the action being taken by Scottish Government and our partners to monitor the situation and mitigate - as far as possible - any negative impacts. Colleagues from the Met Office, SEPA and Scottish Water provided an update and were present to answer any questions MSPs may have had.

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