

FAQs: Answering Customer Questions

Water Shortage Contingency Plan - Voluntary Stage

Last Updated 9-19-23

Background: After an unusually dry summer and with an extended forecast that calls for continued dry conditions, Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) activated the Voluntary Stage of our Water Shortage Contingency Plan on September 21. The 1.5 million people in the greater Seattle area that get water from the Seattle regional water system are being asked to voluntarily reduce their water use.

What can I do to save water?

[Visit the Saving Water Partnership's website](#), [SavingWater.org](#), for more information and the full list actions you can take to save water. Here are some of the top actions we are asking customers to take:

- Stop watering your lawn for the season. Water established trees, shrubs, and perennials once a month or less. (It's okay to efficiently water newly planted lawns, young plants and trees, and vegetable gardens).
- Take shorter or fewer showers and take showers instead of baths.
- Fix leaks, especially running toilets.

Who is being asked to save water?

Everyone (residences and businesses) who gets water from the Seattle regional water system. That includes 25 different water utilities and a total of 1.5 million people in the greater Seattle area. We have a map of the affected utilities and customers on [SavingWater.org](#) and [Seattle.gov/utilities](#).

Why are we concerned about our water supply?

Our water comes from snow and rain that collects in two reservoirs in the Cascade Mountains. Our water supply was looking good for much of the year. However, dry conditions have drawn down the reservoirs faster than normal. Extended forecasts show continued dry weather and a potential delay in the return of sustained fall rains. As a result, we are concerned about having sufficient water through the end of the year for people and fish. [Visit Seattle Public Utilities' blog](#) to keep up with the latest water supply information.

What's our goal? How much water do we need to save?

Our regional water use nearly doubles during summer, mostly due to irrigation. We want to reduce our use down to winter water levels (100 million gallons a day) as soon as possible and keep it at or below that level until the return of sustained fall rains refill our mountain reservoirs to the necessary levels. We don't have a specific goal we need each person or household to save—we all can do something, and it all adds up to make a difference.

Do my actions really matter?

We all have a part to play. If we work together to reduce our water use in our homes, businesses, and outdoors we can stretch our water supply until we get enough rain to refill the mountain reservoirs to the necessary levels. Even seemingly small everyday actions add up to make a difference.

How long will this last? When will conditions return to normal?

We will deactivate the plan and let customers know they can go back to normal water use when we get enough rain to sufficiently fill our mountain reservoirs.

Why didn't you alert the public sooner?

The water supply was looking good for much of the year. We had a healthy snowpack this winter and hit our water supply refill targets this spring. However, the last several months have been very dry as are the forecasted conditions into the fall. As those forecasts became firmer, we started taking steps to activate our Water Shortage Contingency Plan.

What is the City of Seattle doing to reduce its own water use?

All City of Seattle departments are making operational changes to reduce their water use related to irrigation, vehicle washing, washing plazas/foyers/sidewalks, and turning off water features. Seattle Public Utilities is reducing non-essential water use such as water meter testing and in-city reservoir cleaning. Seattle Parks Department is implementing their own water shortage plan. Seattle Fire Department is going to delay training exercises when possible and will stop flowing water during hydrants tests.

It rained recently, is the drought over?

We typically get about 26 inches of rain in our mountain watersheds between May and September. This year we only received a quarter of that. All rain is helpful! However, to sufficiently refill our reservoirs, we need sustained rain in the mountains. [Visit Seattle Public Utilities' blog](#) to keep up with the latest water supply information.

Are we going to run out of water? Should I stock up on bottled water?

There is no need to buy bottled water or skimp on water used for cooking, drinking, and sanitation. We activated the Voluntary Stage of our plan because we are concerned about a potential water shortage this fall. In past instances when we used the Voluntary Stage, the community really stepped up and used less water. If we all save where we can, we are confident we can stretch our supply until the return of the sustained fall rains.

Is this happening because of climate change?

We can't say that the dry weather this year is specifically due to climate change. However, we do know that over the long-term, climate change will bring warmer temperatures and more precipitation falling as rain instead of snow. We are tracking climate change forecasts and planning water supply and system work to ensure enough water for people and fish decades from now.

How often does this happen? How reliable is our water supply?

We don't activate the shortage plan very often. It's only happened 6 times in our history. The last time we activated the plan and asked customers to reduce their water use was in 2015.

Will the salmon in the Cedar and Tolt Rivers be impacted?

There are many fish species in our two mountain watersheds including Chinook, Coho and Sockeye Salmon, Bull Trout, Steelhead, and more. We manage the water in our system in a way that supports the fish and ecosystems of the rivers. This year (and every year) we will continue to release water from the mountain reservoirs into the rivers so that fish have enough water, manage river flows so that salmon redds (nests) don't dry out, and in the winter use our dams to hold back storm water when it could wash out salmon redds (nests).