

Drought in 2013? Is Your System Prepared?

By Randy Hellbusch, Circuit Rider

I received an e-mail on an article from NET Nebraska entitled "2013: A New Year, Same old Drought." Below is a quote from that article.

"Unfortunately (the drought is) not over and we're definitely starting 2013 in a different status than what we entered 2012," said Michael Hayes, director of the National Drought Mitigation Center based at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

I know several water systems in Nebraska were taxed last summer due to the dry conditions. Is your system ready for another possible record dry summer? Although no one can predict or control the weather, there are steps that can be taken to ensure that your water system will be able to keep up during times of peak usage. One of the best steps that can be taken is to curb that peak. The best way to accomplish this is with an appropriate conservation ordinance.

Every water system is unique and in order to develop a good conservation ordinance a water system must rely on historical data. This is where good record keeping is a must. It is important to know what the drawdown levels have been in past years in conjunction with gallons of water pumped. How many hours per day do your wells run on a normal summer day vs. an extremely hot, dry time.

With this information it is possible to decide when action is needed. Most drought plans/ordinances are implemented in stages: Water Watch, Water Warning & Water Emergency.

For example, a Water Watch may be triggered when water levels are 5' below normal, water consumption is 20% higher than normal or wells are running 14 hours per 24 hour period. At this point the system may elect to do public education and ask that non-essential water use be limited.

A Water Warning may come into effect, for example, if water levels fall 10' below normal, water consumption is 30% above normal or the wells are now running 18 hours per 24 hour period. At this point the system may need to inform the public that outside watering will be limited to a certain number of hours per day and only during certain times of the day.

A Water Emergency may come into effect, for example, when water levels are only 5' above well screens, water consumption is 50% above normal or the wells are running 20+ hours per day. At this point the system may need to ban all outdoor water use and prohibit the wasting of water.

A Drought/Emergency Ordinance is one of those tools that every water system hopes they never need to implement. However, now is the time to look through records and make decisions as to at what point would it be necessary to address water usage and/or start educating the public on the need to conserve. NeRWA has sample drought ordinances and information regarding conservation measures. If we can be of any assistance, just give us a call.