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Communities scramble to find emergency water sources

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Normally, reservoir waters would surround this sign in Waltham. The reservoir supplies Cambridge.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 15, 2016

Water levels in parts of drought-stricken Massachusetts have fallen steadily, prompting a growing

number of communities to request emergency supplies — at added cost — from other sources.

On Wednesday, Worcester officials, worried by receding levels in local reservoirs, activated an emergency connection to draw water from the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority at a cost of \$1.7 million per month. Ashland also received approval Wednesday to tap into the supply.

Cambridge and Lynn — whose reservoirs have dropped significantly — are considering similar steps, as are other communities.

“A lot of systems are really feeling the stress,” said Frederick Laskey, executive director of the MWRA, which supplies water for Boston along with dozens of cities and towns across Eastern Massachusetts.



Facing a record-setting dry spell that shows little sign of abating, another 10 communities that normally draw just a portion of their water from the MWRA have increased their reliance on the supply. Demand from those communities has increased 38 percent this year, officials said. Communities seeking supplemental water are connected to the MWRA system.



More than half of Mass. is now in extreme drought

Over half of Massachusetts is in the midst of an extreme drought.

The unusual measures illustrate the harsh toll the drought has taken on the area, from damaged crops to harmed ecosystems to increased risk of wildfires.

The MWRA's main reservoir, the 412 billion gallon Quabbin, has dropped to about 84 percent of capacity, its lowest mark in more than a decade. But officials said the Quabbin is so vast that it can withstand several years of drought, even if more communities require emergency supplies.



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The Quinapoxet Reservoir in Holden.



“We have a lot of water and we’re in a position to not only weather the drought, but also to help other systems that don’t have the storage we have,” Laskey said.



The Quabbin slipped below 80 percent of capacity in 2002, the last severe drought to grip the state. The MWRA considers water levels of 80 percent or higher to be normal for the Quabbin, and its six-month outlook estimates that levels will remain above this threshold.

Over the years, demand for water from the Quabbin and other reservoirs has plummeted, in part because of conservation efforts. In the 1980s, for instance, MWRA customers drew an average of roughly 330 million gallons per day. By 2015, usage had fallen to about 207 million gallons per day.

The goal is to keep daily use below 300 million gallons, Laskey said. That's the amount officials say the MWRA could safely and reliably provide through a prolonged drought.

The [extremely hot and dry summer has](#) forced many communities to impose [restrictions on outdoor water use](#). [Drought conditions are expected to persist](#) through the fall.

Forecasters say they expect precipitation levels to remain below-average to average, at best, through November.

“We’re hoping for some heavy rain in the fall and spring and heavy snowfall in the winter,” Laskey said. “We’ve got our fingers crossed.”

“We don’t know if this drought is going to end in a week or three years from now,” he added. “So you should prepare for the worst.”

Worcester’s reservoir system, which also serves Holden, Paxton, and parts of West Boylston, had fallen to 55 percent of capacity by the start of the month. Normally, it is at about 80 percent of capacity at this point in the year.

Last week, city officials [announced](#) a “Stage 3” drought emergency and strictly limited outdoor water use. City spokesman John Hill said Worcester has had an emergency connection to the MWRA for

decades but hasn't turned to it since the 1990s.

Worcester plans to pay for the supplemental water using reserve funds, which should cover at least a couple months.

"As of right now, we're taking it a month at a time," Hill said. "If we get enough rain, hopefully, in September, then we may not need to purchase more."

Lynn Water and Sewer Commission superintendent Rick Dawe said the city's reservoir has dropped to about 48 percent of capacity, prompting water restrictions. City officials have talked to the MWRA about tapping into its supply but have no "immediate plans" to do so, he said.

In Cambridge, the water department's managing director, Sam Corda, said the city's three reservoirs are a little under 50 percent of capacity, below normal levels for this time.

"Obviously that's of concern to us," he said.

If conditions don't improve, the city may have to reach out to the MWRA. For now, Corda said, "we're at an acceptable place at this point."

"We are watching our system on a daily basis," he said.

Reservoir levels around Massachusetts

Data are measured as a percentage of total reservoir capacity, unless otherwise noted. Figures below for Cambridge, Lynn, and Worcester were provided by local water officials in those cities. The rest of the data were provided by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation's Office of Water Resources, which collects such statistics monthly as representative samples to help judge conditions across the state.

Water system	Normal levels	Current levels	As of
Cambridge	60-70%	<50%	Sept. 13
Cohasset	76%	56%	Aug. 31
Lenox	77%	77%	Aug. 31
Lynn	65%	48%	Sept. 11
Milford	61%	44%	Aug. 31
North Andover	110.9' elevation	109.35' elevation	Aug. 31
Pittsfield	89%	84%	Aug. 31
Salem-Beverly	85%	79%	Aug. 31

Southbridge	92%	80%	Aug. 31
Springfield	82%	78%	Aug. 31
Taunton	91%	80%	Aug. 31
Worcester	82%	55%	Sept. 1

SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Cambridge Water Department, Lynn Water and Sewer Commission, City of Worcester

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