

“Seattle Public Utilities Water Supply FAQ

“Voluntary Stage”

(modified for use by SPU’s wholesale customers)

August 11, 2015

1. How does SPU’s activation of their Water Shortage Contingency Plan impact Highline Water District?

We, Highline Water District, purchase water from SPU. SPU operates a regional water supply system and not only provides water within the City of Seattle, but also wholesales water to over 20 other Cities and water districts in King County. The water supply issue impacts the entire SPU regional water system and therefore all partners, like us, need to do their part to help. We are asking our customers to carefully manage their water use.

2. What’s the latest information on water supply?

After unusually hot weather, the driest May through June on record and in preparation of a potentially drier-than-normal fall, Everett, Seattle and Tacoma have moved to the second stage of their water shortage response plans – voluntary reduction – and are asking customers to reduce their water use by 10 percent. The three cities continue to work in partnership to ensure that the entire region is ready for a potential water shortage, if fall rains return late.

3. Why is the “Voluntary Stage” of the plans being activated now?

Water supply conditions constantly change based on river and reservoir conditions, current and forecasted weather, customer water demand, forecasted water supply conditions, and other factors. We want people to start reducing their water use now, which will increase our supply for people and for fish in the next months until fall rains return.

4. How will reducing water use by 10 percent address the potential water shortage situation? For example, will it buy us an extra week of supply? Two weeks? A day?

The water supply conditions are highly variable and dependent on weather. Given that variability, it’s difficult to give a precise answer to the question. However, we can estimate that a 10 percent reduction in water use would equate to about 15 to 20 million gallons per day, given current water use rates. That is a substantial amount that will help extend the water supply.

5. Does Seattle have enough water for the summer and into the fall?

Seattle has sufficient water for the summer and into the fall when it typically begins to rain significantly in the watersheds. In the event that fall rains return late, it will be necessary to have additional water stored in our reservoirs, for people and for fish. That is why we are asking customers to reduce their water use now – just in case we need extra water for the fall and winter months until it starts to rain in our watersheds.

6. If water consumption drops by 10 percent by the end of August, will Seattle’s water supply be back to normal? If not, what will it take to get back to normal?

A 10 percent reduction in water use will make a big difference, and we are counting on our customers to help us achieve this goal. However, we do not expect water supply to return to normal until after there is significant rainfall in our watersheds. In the meantime, SPU continues to monitor and evaluate the City’s water supply condition on a daily basis and will share information with the public on how close we are to reaching the 10 percent reduction rate.

7. If I reduce my water consumption by 10 percent, can I expect to see a reduction in my water bill?

In general, reducing the amount of water that you use in your home will lower your water bill. The specific amount of savings will vary from customer to customer, depending on the current amount of water used and the amount of reduction in water use. [Please visit our website to learn more about how your water bill is calculated.](#)

8. Why did the region choose 10 percent? That doesn’t seem like a lot – why aren’t you asking customers to reduce their water use by 20 or 30 percent?

First, our customers have already been key partners in using water wisely over the past several decades. In the 1980s summertime use of water used to peak at more than 300 million gallons per day; it now peaks at around 200 million gallons per day, despite substantial population growth since the 1980s.

Second, a 10 percent reduction in water use is consistent with what is called for in the “Voluntary Stage” of our [Water Shortage Contingency Plan](#). If conditions worsen, we may move to the “Mandatory Stage” of the plan and require that customers reduce their water use by a greater percentage, but we’re not there yet.

9. What is SPU doing to ensure that all communities in Seattle are aware of the potential water shortage and know what they should be doing to help?

SPU is translating water supply material into multiple languages and partnering with underserved communities to help deliver information to residents who may not hear our ads and reports on radio, see information on TV or go to our website or newspapers for information. We strongly encourage our customers to share information with their neighbors, family, friends and co-workers and urge them to reduce their water use.

10. Every couple of weeks, it seems like Seattle is reporting something different and asking customers to do something different. Why does the city’s water supply forecasting and messaging keep changing?

There are multiple factors (forecasted and current weather, customer water demand, reservoir inflows, river flows, hydraulic modeling results and system operations) that help the City determine its water supply outlook. These factors change on a daily to weekly basis, which means we have to be flexible and adaptable in our outlook.

11. I'm worried about our fish population. What is SPU doing to protect fish during this drought?

SPU continues to release water from its reservoirs to help augment stream flows for fish on the Cedar and South Fork Tolt Rivers. This provides protection for rearing salmon and steelhead trout.

12. What should customers do now to help?

We are in Stage 2 of the plan — the Voluntary Stage. Everett, Seattle and Tacoma customers are being asked to voluntarily reduce their water use by 10 percent. Here are some ways customers can reduce their water use both indoors and outdoors.

Outdoor Tips:

- Let your lawn go dormant and limit plant watering to twice a week.
- Water plants before 8am (best) or after 7pm.
- Wash your vehicle(s) at locations that recycle the water.
- Do only essential pressure washing.
- Minimize refilling swimming pools and hot tubs.
- Turn off water features.
- Fall is the best time for planting.

Indoor Tips:

- Reduce your showering time.
- Check for and fix leaks.
- Wash only full loads of laundry and dishes.
- Turn off the tap while brushing your teeth or shaving.
- Don't pre-rinse dishes.
- If purchasing fixtures/equipment, choose water-efficient models.

Commercial Tips:

- Encourage reduced showering times at your facilities.
- Serve water only on request.
- Check for and fix leaks.
- Wash only full loads of laundry and dishes.
- Provide new towels only on request.
- Check cooling towers for overflow and excessive blowdown.
- If purchasing fixtures/equipment, choose water-efficient models.

Additional water saving tips is available at savingwater.org.

13. If you are concerned about a possible water shortage now, why are you waiting to implement mandatory conservation measures?

We have moved to the next stage of the plan – “Voluntary” – because the potential for a future water shortage has increased. We would implement mandatory reduction measures

(Stage 3 of our Water Shortage Contingency Plan) if the potential increases to the point at which mandatory reductions are needed.

14. How important is the reduction of demand in comparison to the arrival of the rain?

Our customers are key partners in making sure there is enough of this precious resource to last until the return of fall rains. Water-use reductions will help stretch water supplies, but the return of fall rains will replenish decreasing supplies.

15. When did you first know there could be a possible water shortage? Specific date, please. Why didn't you implement the water shortage plan back when you first realized that? How many gallons could have been saved if you had acted earlier?

We constantly monitor and operate our water supply and use hydrologic models to forecast our water supply outlook. Since May, when our reservoirs were filled successfully and the outlook was “good,” unusually hot and dry conditions have caused continued shifts in the water supply outlook to the current point at which we activated our Water Shortage Contingency Plan in July and have moved to the voluntary stage of the plan.

16. Why didn't SPU start asking for water reductions weeks ago when the utility came out and said water supply was “fair?” You didn't mention a water shortage then. What—specifically—has changed since then? Were you excessively confident, given what you're saying now?

We constantly monitor and operate our water supply and use hydrologic models to forecast our water supply outlook. Since May, when our reservoirs were filled successfully and the outlook was “good,” unusually hot and dry conditions have caused a change in the water supply outlook. In addition, current weather projections are more certain now that it will be drier and warmer in the months ahead.

17. We're in the voluntary stage now. How do we determine whether we need to move to the mandatory stage?

SPU is constantly monitoring our water supplies and our system demands. We are also coordinating with local, state, federal and tribal agencies interested in the management of river flows and fisheries, and together making decisions to optimize the use of water resources. If the continued analysis of this data shows that a further reduction in demands is needed to meet the needs of our customers, or the rivers, we will move to the next step in the WSCP, which is a mandatory reduction in water use.

18. What is the Water Shortage Contingency Plan?

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) has a [Water Shortage Contingency Plan \(WSCP\)](#), which provides guidelines for SPU to manage water supply and demand when there's a potential or actual water shortage. The plan has four stages that may be phased in over time:

- Stage 1: Advisory Stage
- Stage 2: Voluntary Stage
- Stage 3: Mandatory Stage
- Stage 4: Emergency Curtailment Stage

19. What's the difference between the four stages?

- The advisory stage lets customers know that the potential exists for a water supply shortage and that customers should be especially thoughtful in their use of water.
- The voluntary stage asks for support from customers to decrease water usage to meet consumption goals for both residential and commercial users.
- The mandatory stage could implement limitations or prohibitions on certain actions which would be enforceable and punishable with fines for repeated violations.
- The emergency stage would only be implemented in the event of a critical water shortage threatening public health and safety. This type of situation has never occurred in the Seattle's history. At this stage, SPU would be authorized to require increasingly stringent water use restrictions, and to establish rate surcharges designed to reduce water demand.

20. You say SPU monitors water supply carefully. What is involved with this?

We measure precipitation, stream flows, reservoir storage, water consumption and more. This gives a snapshot that we review on a daily basis.

We also look at historical trends and use complex hydrologic models that can help project reservoir elevations and river flows, taking into account reservoir inflow, water use for people and fish, and other factors.

21. You mention flexibility in the water supply system. Can you talk about this? And what about fish habitat?

Seattle is fortunate to have two main sources of drinking water—the South Fork Tolt and the Cedar Rivers.

In addition, we are taking several actions which include preparing pumps that can help access billions of additional gallons of water at our Chester Morse Lake Reservoir in the Cedar River watershed and turning on the city's well field north of Sea-Tac Airport.

All of this gives us some flexibility in how we manage our water supply.