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France activates drought plan as water shortages spread unusually early

With 97 departments under restrictions, officials warn of worsening pressure on rivers, farms and drinking water supplies

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France has activated its national drought management system as an unusually early and severe dry spell spreads across the country, prompting local prefects to tighten water-use restrictions and raising concerns for agriculture and other water-dependent

sectors during the peak summer season.

In a statement issued Monday, the Ministry for Ecological Transition said conditions at this point in the year are comparable to 2022, one of France’s benchmark drought years, and in some respects more worrying for soils and rivers. The government said the lack of meaningful rainfall, combined with forecasts for a hotter and drier than normal summer, has led it to strengthen monitoring, anticipation and management of water resources.

The ministry described a rapid deterioration in hydrological conditions across mainland France and Corsica. Soil dryness is now widespread, it said, with the Massif Central, a key water source region for the country, already heavily affected at the start of summer. River conditions are presenting the most immediate concern. Since early June, flows have fallen quickly nationwide. Nearly one-third of monitoring stations are recording levels below the minimum observed over the past 20 years for the same period, according to the ministry, while one-quarter of small waterways have now run dry. The government said that is unprecedented since national tracking began in 2012.

The Loire’s natural flow has dropped to historically low levels for July, leading authorities to begin low-flow support measures earlier than usual. Groundwater levels are also continuing to decline, although the ministry said aquifers remain in a better position than in 2022 or 2023 because spring recharge was satisfactory. More reactive aquifers, especially in Auvergne, Limousin and the Grand Est, are under closer watch and could fall sharply in coming weeks.

The government linked the situation to a broader disruption of the water cycle. It said episodes of intense rainfall seen in recent months are no longer enough to prevent prolonged drought periods. Reservoir dams were able to build up reserves, with filling rates at 74% for EDF and 70% for Voies navigables de France, but those reserves are being used earlier than in previous years to support river flows through the summer.

The effects are already visible beyond hydrology. The ministry said some territories are facing pressure on drinking water supplies. It also reported early economic impacts, including restrictions affecting certain industrial activities in the hardest-hit areas. Aquatic ecosystems are under strain from warmer waters, with fish deaths reported,

difficulties for shellfish farming especially around the Mediterranean coast, and heavy losses at fish farms in Brittany, southwestern France and Normandy. Wildlife rescue centers are also seeing a sharp rise in birds, bats and wild mammals affected by extreme heat.

Under France’s drought framework, adopted in 2023 and organized around four severity levels, prefects can impose local restrictions depending on conditions. The ministry said an interministerial instruction signed on July 3 by Ecological Transition Minister Monique Barbut and Health Minister Stéphanie Rist further reinforced that system by requiring departmental water resource committees to meet, calling for rapid issuance of restriction orders once thresholds are crossed, increasing inspections and setting weekly basin-level monitoring.

As of Monday, 97 departments were subject to restrictions on water use and 41 of them were at the crisis level, the most severe category. In total, 201 prefectural orders were in force. Nouvelle-Aquitaine was identified as the region under the greatest pressure, with 11 of its 12 departments placed at crisis level.

Depending on local severity, those orders can limit agricultural irrigation, filling private swimming pools, washing vehicles, watering gardens and some industrial uses. The ministry said the aim is to preserve water for essential needs and reduce damage to natural environments.

For France’s drinks sector, the tightening restrictions could become significant if dry conditions persist. Limits on irrigation may add pressure on vineyards during a critical growing period and could affect yields, grape balance and harvest planning in some areas. Breweries, distillers and other beverage producers may also face higher water-management costs or operational adjustments where local restrictions intensify. Those effects will depend on how long the drought lasts and how conditions evolve by region.

The ministry called for continued public efforts to reduce water use as conditions may worsen in coming weeks. A national awareness campaign is being rolled out to encourage conservation measures such as fixing leaks, taking showers instead of baths and collecting rainwater for outdoor use where allowed. Prefects are also continuing consultations with water users to adapt local measures as conditions change.

The government said it remains focused on protecting access to drinking water, preserving ecosystems and helping territories cope with the effects of climate change as France enters what could be another difficult summer for water resources.