

May 23rd 2017

Drought? Here?! But hasn't it been raining recently?

Last week Cape Town announced level 4 water restrictions - meaning people are not allowed to wash vehicles, top up swimming pools or water gardens. In fact, it's recommended there that residents use no more than 100 litres a day (the average in the UK is 150). In California, the drought emergency, announced in 2014, is finally over, but California's Governor warns "Conservation must remain a way of life." But what about closer to home - are we due for a UK drought?

Rainfall has been below average in lots of parts of the UK in recent months - including in Edinburgh and the North West of England, where we usually think it rains all the time. And it may not feel like it, but the South East of England has had such a dry winter that water companies are now looking seriously at their water supply.

As a result, we've seen more talk about the need to waste less water on the media. But we need to use water more efficiently all the time, not just when there is a resource issue. Here's why - and how.

Why should we waste less water?

Believe it or not, the UK has less available water per person than most other European countries. In fact, London is drier than Istanbul. After an officially dry winter in parts of England, Met Office figures revealed April 2017 to be the 10th driest on record. According to the Environment Agency, in England rainfall in April ranged from just 19% of average in the south-east to 44% in the south-west. And Edinburgh was the driest place in the UK in April.

Nicci Russell, Waterwise MD, said

'And there's no new water! The water we have now is the same water that was around at the dawn of human life. But there are more of us now than there were in those days. And now we use water for things like manufacturing and energy production, as well as increasing human consumption. So we must make the water we do have go further. Without water we can't function - as human beings or as an economy that's dependent on factories, shops, schools, hospitals, and transport. Anywhere people are, water is needed.'

On top of this, erratic rainfall patterns caused by climate change increase the risk of drought, which can also have a huge environmental impact on rivers, lakes and wetlands, and on agriculture. These effects are already being felt by farmers across the UK - in the long term this could reduce their income and increase the price of British produce in the supermarkets.

In addition, carbon emissions are produced by every litre of water and wastewater the water companies treat, and pump round their networks - as well as when we heat water in our homes, schools, hospitals and workplaces. In fact 90% of greenhouse gas emissions produced in water supply, use and disposal in the UK are from heating water in the home¹! So wasting less water is

¹ [Energy Saving Trust and Environment Agency, 2009](#)

really important for both adapting to and preventing climate change.

So what can we do?

Nicci Russell, Waterwise Managing Director, said

'It's not all bad news! In fact there are many simple and fun things we can all do to reduce our water wastage every day - at home, in the garden and in the workplace. This also reduces water bills (especially if you get a water meter fitted), and where hot water is saved, energy bills too.

'Unlike decades ago when it was all about baths, most of us have showers now: showers use less water than a bath, and cutting just one minute off your shower can save 8-16 litres each time. That's around 24,000 litres a year saved by a family of 4, also saving over £100 and as much carbon as driving a car for 8 hours straight! Water companies and DIY stores provide free or cheap showerheads and widgets to reduce the amount of water used without affecting the showering experience. Dripping taps are hugely wasteful - losing around one full bathtub of water every 6 days - and often simple to fix. Full loads in the dishwasher and washing machine cut water waste - adding just one heavy item to the washing machine can save 5 litres each time it's used. And don't use your toilet as a rubbish bin - flushing one tissue you've used to wipe your nose can use between 5 and 10 litres of water.

'Using mulch and bark on your garden can help to reduce evaporation by up to 75% - meaning you don't need to water as often. Up to 80,000 litres a year can be collected from your roof in a year, so save this in a water butt and use it to water your garden. Water your pet on the lawn - proper recycling of water! Garden sprinklers use 1,000 litres of water an hour, which is what an average family of four uses in a day, so if you must use one, just do it in the morning and evening - don't leave it on all day. Don't worry if your lawn goes brown - it will soon turn green again with the next rain shower.

'Finally, go and visit and enjoy your local river, stream or lake. Getting up close and personal with water will make you not want to waste it!

'If we work together to waste less water, we can prevent more extreme measures such as hosepipe bans, and worse. In 2012 the London Olympics were under threat after two dry winters - but we were saved by the rain!'

Notes to Editors:

Waterwise: Waterwise is an independent not-for-profit organisation, and the leading authority on water efficiency in the UK. Our vision is that water will be used wisely, every day, everywhere. Follow us on twitter @waterwise and via www.waterwise.org.uk for water saving tips and updates and to hear about the work we are doing in the UK and beyond.

Waterwise is available for broadcast and print interviews. For further information please contact Hazel Lewis on hazel.lewis@waterwise.org.uk or 07522 285207

Most UK water companies provide free advice and products that will help their customers to save water in the home. Contact www.water.org.uk to find your local water company.