

Low water levels: frequently asked questions

Date: 9 February 2018

What's the situation with Southland's rivers and aquifers?

Rainfall across the region in 2017 was the lowest since at least 1971, when Environment Southland's rain gauge network was established. Consequently, there was little recharge to our underground aquifers, which resulted in river flows declining more quickly than normal.

The rainfall at the beginning of February 2018 had a positive effect on river levels, however unless sustained or regular rainfall occurs, river levels are expected to continue to drop.

What can we expect going forward?

New Zealand's regional climate over the next three months is anticipated to be dominated by the very warm ocean waters present around the country and in the Tasman sea, which will influence surface air temperatures and the likelihood of significant rainfall events.

For Southland, NIWA has indicated:

- Temperatures are very likely to be above average (70% chance).
- Rainfall totals are about equally likely to be near normal (40% chance) or above normal (35% chance).
- Soil moisture levels and river flows are equally likely to be in the near normal range (40% chance) or below normal range (40% chance).

It's important to note that even if rain is going to fall at 'normal' levels, because our aquifers have been so depleted, it still means that river flows are likely to drop quickly after rainfall.

When should I get in touch with Environment Southland?

Don't delay getting in touch with us if you have concerns about meeting the conditions of your resource consent, or are unsure whether it's okay to carry out an activity on the farm. We're here to help, and will put you in contact with someone from our consents or land sustainability team to discuss options. Call us on 0800 76 88 45 or email to service@es.govt.nz.

My well/bore has run dry. What can I do?

The most common reason for a bore running dry is that well screens become clogged from lack of maintenance. Over time, silt and fine material accumulates and impedes the flow of water into the bore or well.

Bore yield and reliability of supply can generally be restored by having the bore or well flushed by an experienced contractor. Landowners should also check hoses and fittings to ensure there are no leaks and that pump intakes and foot valves are adequately positioned below the water table.

How much water am I allowed to take from rivers for stock troughs?

Under the Resource Management Act, a person is allowed to take 10,000L of water per day from rivers for reasonable domestic needs, or the reasonable drinking water needs of their animals. There are some conditions to this, and it is important to contact Environment Southland with your intentions beforehand, so that we can advise you on where you can abstract without breaching any of the environmental degradation conditions, and mitigate impacts on other water users.

Are you prosecuting people who are taking more water than they're allowed?

Any breach of consent conditions will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

What support is available to farmers?

The Southland Rural Support Trust is available to help. If you need to get pointed in the right direction for advice or information, are concerned about a friend, a neighbour, a worker, or just need a private chat, their services are free & confidential. Call 0800 RURAL HELP (0800 787 254) or visit www.rural-support.org.nz.

Drought Support Events were held in Otautau and Gore in January. If you missed these events, all presentations are now available on Environment Southland's website at www.es.govt.nz/low-water-levels.

My grass isn't growing and my stock can't find food. Can I graze my riparian buffers?

Every farm is different, so we're working with farmers on a case-by-case basis to look at options. We strongly encourage good planning and getting in touch with us early on 0800 76 88 45 or service@es.govt.nz.

Are farmers still able to use their irrigators?

Some farmers are continuing to irrigate within the conditions of their resource consents. Consent conditions vary from property to property, and farmers tend to draw their water from a range of sources, including stored supplies.

Consents for water takes from both rivers and groundwater come with certain conditions – which can relate to river flow, levels, water take volume, or abstraction rates. Now's the time for farmers to become familiar with these conditions and put plans in place if water levels continue to drop.

I'm not on town supply and my water is running low. Can I take drinking water from an alternative source?

We recommend having any alternative drinking water supplies tested by a laboratory first, to ensure they meet drinking water standards, whether they come from stored supplies or other bores.

What are the water restrictions where I live?

Currently, all towns have water restrictions in place, but the Invercargill City Council no longer does. For details on restrictions in your area, visit your local council website:

[Southland District Council](#)

[Gore District Council](#)

What can I do to conserve water around the home and garden?

Ideas on how to conserve water around the house and garden are available on the ICC website:

<https://icc.govt.nz/water-every-drop-counts-these-days/>

What other restrictions will be put in place if we don't get some heavy, sustained rain?

As a next step, Environment Southland could issue a water shortage direction, which would put further restrictions on water takes and discharge consents throughout the region. This will however be considered very carefully.