Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

DROUGHT COORDINATION TECHNICAL COMMITTEE
MARCH 19, 2026 MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Materials are posted on the DCTC meeting website located at:
https://www.mwcog.org/events/2026/3/19/drought-coordination-technical-committee/

Potomac Basin Drought Status and Outlook: Richard Tinker from the National Weather Service provided a comprehensive update on current drought conditions, recent precipitation trends, streamflow and vegetation status, and forecasts for the Potomac Basin.

- **Current Drought Conditions:** Most of the Potomac Basin is experiencing moderate drought (D1), with some areas on the fringes facing worse conditions and others showing improvement; recent drought monitor maps indicate a shift from severe drought earlier in the year to current moderate levels.
- **Precipitation and Streamflow Trends:** The past 30 days saw above-normal precipitation in parts of the Basin, longer-term deficits persist, especially in the southeast; streamflows are near normal but with pockets of below-normal flows, particularly in the lower and upper basin.
- **Vegetation and Soil Moisture:** Vegetative stress is evident across much of the Basin, with reports confirming dry soils and slow crops start; topsoil moisture remains low due to accumulated precipitation deficits over several months.
- **Short- and Long-Term Forecasts:** Forecasts for the next several weeks suggest near- to below-normal precipitation and temperatures, with the monthly and seasonal outlooks indicating a slight tilt toward above-normal precipitation and temperatures, though the odds are not strong and improvement is not guaranteed.
- **El Niño and Hurricane Season Impacts:** El Niño conditions are expected to develop by the end of summer, which could lead to heavier precipitation in the fall and winter, and that El Niño typically suppresses Atlantic hurricane activity, though the official outlook will be released in the coming months.

CO-OP System Report: Ms. Shultz provided an update on the CO-OP system, highlighting recent above-normal precipitation and full reservoirs, but also emphasizing ongoing precipitation deficits, increased drought monitoring, and the results of a recent water supply study.

- **Reservoir and Flow Status: S**ystem reservoirs are full or filling, with Little Seneca, Occoquan, and Jennings Randolph water supply at 100% capacity, though Savage and Jennings Randolph water quality reservoirs are still filling and Patuxent remains uncertain.
- **Drought Monitoring and Precipitation Deficits:** Due to substantial precipitation deficits since August, CO-OP conducted daily drought monitoring from September through February, an unusually lengthy period, with drought watches and warnings in Maryland, Virginia, and

Pennsylvania.

- **Seasonal Drought Risk:** A new seasonal forecast model indicates an elevated risk of summer drought operations, with the risk potentially double the historical average, though similar conditions last year did not result in drought operations due to subsequent wet months.
- **Water Supply Study Findings:** The 2025 Washington Metropolitan Area Water Supply Study found a 99–100% chance of system reliability in 2030 but identified potential future pressures from increased upstream consumptive use by data centers and climate change, which could reduce river flows during extreme drought years.
- **Data Center and Peak Demand Concerns:** In response to Kishia's questions, Cherie clarified that while system-wide demand has been flat, data center growth could increase both upstream consumptive use and public supply demand, with future studies planned to assess impacts; Steven emphasized that peak demand from data centers may coincide with periods of low river flow during hot, dry weather.

Utility and State Agency Status Updates: Priscilla, Jay, Jamie, Rudy, Charles, Lainey, and Andrew provided operational updates from WSSC Water, Fairfax Water, Washington Aqueduct, USGS, Maryland Department of the Environment, and Virginia DEQ, noting generally normal operations but highlighting concerns about early algal activity, construction constraints, lagging groundwater recharge, and the potential for rapid drought intensification if dry conditions persist.

- **WSSC Water Operations:** Priscilla and Jay reported early algal activity in both Patuxent and Potomac supplies, ongoing construction at the Potomac plant limiting production flexibility, and Patuxent Reservoir at 70% storage, with efforts to minimize production at Patuxent constrained by operational needs.
- **Fairfax Water and Washington Aqueduct:** Jamie stated that Occoquan supply is 100% full and operations are normal with no anticipated constraints, while Rudy noted normal operations at the Aqueduct, improved water quality, and the installation of continuous algae monitoring at Great Falls Intake.
- **USGS Groundwater and Streamflow:** Charles shared that most streamflow sites are in normal range, groundwater levels are mixed with some increasing and some decreasing, and accumulated flow is approaching normal after a dry period, with previous ice conditions impacting flows.
- **Maryland and Virginia Drought Status:** Lainey reported that Maryland remains on drought Watch due to low groundwater levels despite recent precipitation, raising concerns for small water systems, while Andrew explained that most of Virginia is under drought advisory or warning, with recent rains improving streamflow but groundwater recharge lagging and the risk of low flows if dry conditions return.

NOAA Drought Early Warning System Initiative: The NOAA NIDIS program is initiating the development of a drought early warning system for the Mid-Atlantic, with a strategic planning meeting scheduled for April 9th.

- The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) is a multi-agency program led by NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). It was authorized by Congress in 2006 (the National Integrated Drought Information System Act; Public Law 109-430) and

reauthorized in 2014 and 2019. NIDIS coordinates and integrates drought monitoring, forecasting, planning, research, and information delivery across federal, tribal, state, regional, and local levels nationwide.

- Its core mission is to shift the nation from reactive drought response to proactive early warning and resilience-building. NIDIS serves as a federal "front door" for drought information via Drought.gov, providing tools such as the U.S. Drought Monitor, outlooks, impacts information, and decision-support resources. It builds regional Drought Early Warning Systems (DEWS) through stakeholder networks to address local needs, identify monitoring gaps, support mitigation planning, and communicate conditions and forecasts.
- In the Mid-Atlantic region (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.), NIDIS has supported partners in understanding and responding to the 2024 drought and its continuation into winter 2024–2025, which was the worst in more than two decades in some locations and had widespread impacts (including agriculture, water supply, ecosystems, and other sectors).
- **Initiative Announcement:** The NOAA's NIDIS program will begin developing a drought early warning system for the Mid-Atlantic region, with a strategic planning meeting hosted by the USGS Science Center in Maryland on April 9th; more details will be distributed throughout the month.

DCTC Recommended Actions and Next Steps: COG recommended maintaining the drought status as Normal for now, continuing to monitor conditions, and proposed scheduling another call in June to reassess, with no opposition from the group.

Follow Up Activities: COG will schedule another Drought Coordination Technical Committee call in June to review water supply and drought conditions and share member updates.