



DROUGHT COORDINATION TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

SEPTEMBER 14, 2026, MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Materials are posted on the DCTC meeting website:

<https://www.mwcog.org/events/2026/9/14/drought-coordination-technical-committee/>

Overall Summary

- The DCTC agreed to maintain the regional Drought Watch because groundwater and other slow-responding indicators remain below normal despite recent improvements in precipitation, streamflow, and reservoir storage. The committee will reconvene in November to reassess regional conditions.
- Recent precipitation substantially improved short-term drought conditions in the Potomac River Basin, but longer-term precipitation deficits persist, and groundwater and some streamflow indicators remain below normal.
- Regional water-supply conditions are improving, and several major reservoirs are near or at full capacity; however, state agencies and partners continue to monitor groundwater recovery closely.
- NIDIS is developing a Mid-Atlantic Drought Early Warning System to strengthen regional coordination, monitoring, communication, and preparedness.
- The developing El Niño could produce a volatile 2026–2027 season, with rapid shifts between warm, dry periods and high-impact precipitation, snow, wind, or flooding.

Detailed Summary

Potomac Basin Drought Status and Outlook: Rich Tinker reported substantial short-term improvement across the Potomac Basin after increased precipitation, while long-term precipitation deficits, deep soil moisture, groundwater, and some streamflows remain below normal; near-term forecasts are uncertain and may trend somewhat dry before possible wetter winter conditions.

- **Recent Drought Improvement:** Rich showed that the Basin progressed from widespread D2–D3 conditions to substantially improved conditions by September, with portions of the western basin no longer classified as dry or in drought and D1 conditions concentrated around the Blue Ridge, valley areas, and north-central Maryland.
- **Long-Term Moisture Deficits:** Precipitation over roughly 60–90 days was near normal, but six-month deficits remained approximately three to six inches in parts of the Basin. Deficits exceeded one foot over the preceding two to three years, and five-year precipitation totals also remained below normal. These longer-term measures show that recent rainfall has not fully restored slow-responding hydrologic conditions.

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- **Soil, Groundwater, and Streamflow:** Satellite indicators suggested that root-zone soil moisture and shallow groundwater remained low, although Rich noted that satellite products may exaggerate extremes. Streamflows were closer to normal than at prior meetings, especially in the western Basin, but isolated locations remained below normal or at daily record lows.
- **Forecast Uncertainty:** Rich explained that precipitation forecasts for the following week varied substantially between model runs because models differed on whether a frontal boundary would stall over the region. The six-to-ten-day outlook favored warmer-than-normal temperatures and above-normal precipitation, while the eight-to-fourteen-day outlook could shift toward near-normal or drier conditions.
- **Seasonal Outlook:** The official September–November outlook slightly favored warmer temperatures without a clear wet or dry signal, while several models leaned drier in the eastern Basin. December–February forecasts showed a stronger and more consistent signal for above-normal precipitation, with Rich noting that El Niño winter precipitation signals are more reliable than autumn signals.

USGS, CO-OP, State Agency, and Water Utility Updates: USGS, CO-OP, state agency, and water utility representatives reported mostly normal streamflows and high reservoir levels, while noting continuing groundwater concerns in portions of the region.

- **USGS Streamflow Conditions:** Chuck reported 68 USGS sites in the normal range, with a small number above or below normal and a few at all-time lows. The outliers were generally localized or associated with shorter periods of record, while persistent precipitation deficits continued to weaken baseflow and recharge.
- **Point Of Rocks Forecast:** The Potomac River at Point of Rocks was near the lower end of its normal range. USGS River DroughtCast indicated generally normal conditions in the region and projected Point of Rocks to be largely out of drought, with a possible brief period of drought in early October before improving flow into December.
- **ICPRB Water Supply Outlook:** Alimatou reported near-normal reliability for water-supply releases through the remainder of the year, a major improvement attributed to above-normal July and August precipitation. August Basin precipitation upstream of Washington, D.C., averaged 4.9 inches, or 1.6 inches above normal, although the preceding 12-month total remained 7.3 inches below normal.
- **Reservoir and Water Utility Status:** ICPRB reported that major reservoirs were generally at or above roughly 90 percent full. Jennings Randolph Reservoir was at 100 percent overall, with its water-supply account at 72 percent, while Savage Reservoir was at 66 percent. Fairfax Water reported Occoquan Reservoir at 100 percent; WSSC reported the Patuxent reservoirs at 90 percent and noted algal activity with low toxin levels; Loudoun Water reported Beaver Dam Reservoir full; and the Washington Aqueduct reported normal operations.
- **State Monitoring Actions:** Maryland continued weekly drought monitoring because central Maryland remained in warning status, with groundwater lagging behind improvements in rainfall and streamflow. Virginia DEQ continued weekly task-force meetings and kept Northern Virginia and Shenandoah in warning status because sentinel wells showed readings below the

fifth percentile, despite generally normal precipitation, reservoir, and flow indicators.

Drought Watch Status Discussion: Steve proposed, and the committee accepted without objection, maintaining the regional Drought Watch and reconvening in November to reassess conditions.

- **Committee Recommendation:** After reviewing the regional reports, COG staff recommended maintaining the Drought Watch rather than ending it. No participant objected, and the committee adopted the recommendation.
- **Next Review:** Steve said the group would meet again sometime in November to evaluate whether groundwater, streamflow, precipitation, and other drought indicators had improved or deteriorated over the intervening months.

Mid-Atlantic Drought Early Warning System: Rocky Bilotta described NIDIS's developing Mid-Atlantic Drought Early Warning System, which will use regional partnerships, improved monitoring and forecasting, preparedness planning, targeted communication, and applied research to shift drought management from response to proactive risk reduction.

- **NIDIS Mission:** Rocky explained that NIDIS was created by Congress in 2006 as a multi-agency partnership coordinating drought monitoring, forecasting, planning, impact assessment, and information delivery across federal, tribal, state, local, academic, nonprofit, and private-sector partners. Drought.gov serves as the primary public-facing information portal.
- **DEWS Framework:** A Drought Early Warning System is a collaborative network intended to help farmers, ranchers, water suppliers, wildfire managers, and other decision makers plan for, monitor, forecast, and cope with drought. Its five components are observation and monitoring; prediction and forecasting; planning and preparedness; communication and outreach; and applied research.
- **Lessons From 2024-2025 Drought:** NIDIS and partners assessed the 2024–2025 drought through retrospective meetings that examined drought evolution, response actions, sector-specific impacts, successes, hurdles, and unmet needs. Reported impacts included agricultural losses, livestock water shortages, mandatory and voluntary restrictions, dry wells, wildfire risk, infrastructure delays, and public health effects.
- **Regional Priorities:** Stakeholders identified four broad needs: better alignment between drought indicators and observed conditions; expanded monitoring, training, and tools for assessing drought recovery; stronger regional coordination and preparedness for flash drought and wildfire; and clear, shareable communications tailored to rural, agricultural, and water-management audiences.
- **Strategic Plan Status:** An April 9 strategic-planning meeting formalized the Mid-Atlantic DEWS using stakeholder listening sessions and lessons from the 2024–2025 assessment. The draft strategic plan was under internal NIDIS review and will be shared with regional partners; Rocky also invited participants to join the Mid-Atlantic DEWS email list for updates and webinars.

El Niño Outlook: Sunny Wescott compared historical and current El Niño conditions and described a potentially volatile 2026–2027 season, with possible rapid shifts among warm and cold conditions and episodes of heavy precipitation, snow, wind, or flooding.

- **Current El Niño Strength:** Rich previously characterized the developing El Niño as an exceptionally strong event based on sea-surface-temperature anomalies, potentially among the strongest early-season events in the historical record. Sunny emphasized that historical analogs must be adjusted for the warmer baseline that has developed since 2015.
- **Historical Analogues:** Sunny compared the coming winter with strong El Niño periods including 1957–1958, 2002–2003, 2009–2010, and 2015–2016. Those analogues included heavy snow, wet-snow damage, tornado outbreaks, flooding, transportation disruptions, structural failures, and major utility impacts, while other El Niño winters were exceptionally warm and nearly snowless.
- **Rapid Weather Swings:** Sunny said the region should expect compressed periods of intense precipitation separated by warm, dry, or high-evaporative-demand conditions rather than steady rainfall. Rapid transitions between heat, cold, snow, rain, wind, and freezing conditions could complicate forecasting, public messaging, and grid operations.
- **Infrastructure And Utility Risks:** Sunny identified potential risks from heavy wet snow, stronger winds, freeze–thaw cycles, frost quakes, weakened trees, falling branches, frozen power lines, potholes, sinkholes, water-main damage, aquifer stress, subsidence, and transportation or aviation disruptions. She also noted that warmer waters and changing coastal conditions could increase high-tide flooding, wave impacts, erosion, and harmful algal-bloom persistence.

Follow-up tasks

The committee identified the following actions to maintain regional coordination and prepare for its November reassessment:

- **Drought Monitoring Updates:** Continue the regional Drought Watch and review groundwater, streamflow, precipitation, reservoir, and other drought indicators at the November meeting.
- **Meeting Follow-Up:** Distribute the meeting summary to participants.
- **November Meeting Scheduling:** Send a poll to schedule the next DCTC meeting.