

Seattle Public Utilities Water Supply FAQ

(modified for use by SPU's wholesale customers)

July 27, 2015

1. How does SPU's activation of their Water Shortage Contingency Plan impact Coal Creek Utility District?

We, Coal Creek Utility District, purchase water from SPU. SPU operates a regional water supply system and not only provides water within the City of Seattle, but also wholesales water to over 20 other Cities and water districts in King County. The water supply issue impacts the entire SPU regional water system and therefore all partners, like us, need to do their part to help. We are asking our customers to carefully manage their water use.

2. What's the latest information on water supply?

Record-setting high temperatures, historic low inflows to reservoirs, and increased demand for water over the past couple of months, have led Seattle, along with Tacoma and Everett, to implement the first step of their water shortage response plans. The three entities are all activating their contingency plans as a precautionary measure and have joined together to ensure that the entire region is ready for a potential water shortage.

3. What is the Water Shortage Contingency Plan?

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) has a [Water Shortage Contingency Plan \(WSCP\)](#), which provides guidelines for SPU to manage water supply and demand when there's a potential or actual water shortage. The plan has four stages that may be phased in over time:

- Phase I: Advisory Stage
- Phase II: Voluntary Stage
- Phase III: Mandatory Stage
- Phase IV: Emergency Curtailment Stage

4. What's the difference between the four stages?

- The advisory stage lets customers know that the potential exists for a water supply shortage and that customers should be especially thoughtful in their use of water.
- The voluntary stage could be put in place when available water sources are not expected to be enough to support normal demands and river flow requirements. In that stage, further water use reductions would be requested from customers along with taking steps on the water utility side to reduce use.
- The mandatory stage could be implemented when available water sources plus voluntary reductions are not expected to be enough to meet demands and river flow requirements. Requiring a reduction or elimination of lawn watering is an example of mandatory curtailment.

- The emergency stage would only be implemented in the event of a critical water shortage threatening public health and safety. This type of situation has never occurred in the Seattle’s history. At this stage, SPU would be authorized to require increasingly stringent water use restrictions, and to establish rate surcharges designed to reduce water demand.

5. Why is the plan being activated now?

Water supply conditions constantly change based on river and reservoir conditions, current and forecasted weather, customer water demand, forecasted water supply conditions, and other factors. SPU wants people to be aware that at some point in the future, supply conditions could warrant asking them to reduce their water use.

6. What should customers do now to help?

SPU is in Phase I of the plan — the Advisory Stage. For now, SPU is asking customers to carefully manage their water use. For example:

- Water early or late: water before 8 a.m. or after 7 p.m., which reduces evaporation.
- Water deeply, but infrequently: it is better to have one or two deep waterings, rather than several shallow waterings.
- Fix leaks: Fix obvious indoor and outdoor leaks such as at faucets, hose bibs, and sprinkler spray heads. Check for less obvious leaks such as silent toilet leaks. Put several drops of food coloring in your toilet tank; after 10 minutes if you have color in the toilet bowl, you have a flapper leak.
- Wash vehicles wisely: wash your vehicle(s) at locations that recycle their water.
- Use a broom, not a hose: use a broom, rather than a hose, to clean sidewalks, driveways and patios.
- Wash full loads: wait until your clothes washer and dishwasher are full before starting.
- Additional water saving tips are available at savingwater.org.

7. Why didn’t SPU activate the plan two weeks ago when the utility came out and said water supply was “fair?” SPU didn’t mention a water shortage then. What—specifically—has changed since then? Were they excessively confident, given what you’re saying now?

SPU constantly monitors and operates the water supply and use hydrologic models to forecast the water supply outlook. Since May, when the reservoirs were filled successfully and the outlook was “good,” unusually hot and dry conditions have caused continued shifts in the water supply outlook to the current point at which they are activating their Water Shortage Contingency Plan.

8. The news release says Everett has “enough water for the summer and into the fall.” What about Seattle?

Seattle also has sufficient water for the summer and into the fall. This is specifically because SPU continues to closely watch, manage, and forecast its water supply outlook. This includes bringing to bear the options it has available for tapping contingent resources and, if necessary, requesting reductions in water use from customers.

9. How will the water contingency plans help address the potential water shortage situation? For example, will a 5 percent reduction in demand buy us an extra week of supply? Two weeks? A day?

The water supply conditions are highly variable and dependent on weather. Given that variability, it's not possible to give a precise answer to the question. However, SPU has said for example a 5 percent reduction in water use would equate to about 8-10 million gallons per day, given current water use rates. That is a substantial amount that will help extend the water supply.

10. If SPU is concerned about a possible water shortage now, why are they waiting to implement voluntary or mandatory conservation measures?

SPU is activating the contingency plan because they see that there is a potential for a future water shortage. SPU would implement voluntary reduction measures (Stage 2 of their Water Shortage Contingency Plan) if the potential increases to the point at which voluntary reductions are needed.

It is worth mentioning that all of SPU's customers, which include our regional customers, have already done (and continue to do) quite a lot in helping conserve water. Over the last few decades, customers have been key partners in making water conservation an everyday part of their lives. Their efforts, for example, have led to summertime peak water use declining from 350 million gallons per day to the current peak use of about 200 million gallons per day—despite substantial population growth over the same period. That savings has extended existing water supplies to the point where SPU is not forecasting the need to add new water supplies for several more decades.

11. How important is the reduction of demand in comparison to the arrival of the rain?

All of our customers are key partners in making sure there is enough of this precious resource to last until the return of fall rains. Given the importance of weather, there is not a precise answer to the question. However, SPU wants customers to understand that they play a key part in balancing of water for people and for fish.

12. When did SPU first know there could be a possible water shortage? Specific date, please. Why didn't they implement the water shortage plan back when they first realized that? How many gallons could have been saved if SPU had acted earlier?

SPU is constantly monitoring and operating the water supply and uses hydrologic models to forecast the water supply outlook. Since May, when the reservoirs were filled successfully and the outlook was "good," unusually hot and dry conditions have caused continued shifts in the water supply outlook to the current point at which SPU is activating their Water Shortage Contingency Plan.

13. SPU is in the advisory stage now. How does SPU determine whether they need to move to the voluntary stage?

SPU is constantly monitoring water supplies and system demands. SPU is also coordinating with local, state, federal and tribal agencies interested in the management of river flows and fisheries, and together making decisions to optimize the use of water resources. If the continued analysis of this data shows that a further reduction in demands is needed to meet the critical needs of all of our customers, or the rivers, SPU will move to the next step in the WSCP, which is voluntary reductions in water use.

14. You say SPU monitors water supply carefully. What is involved with this?

SPU measures precipitation, stream flows, reservoir storage, water consumption and more. This gives a snapshot that SPU reviews on a daily basis.

SPU also looks at historical trends and uses complex hydrologic models that can help project reservoir elevations and river flows, taking into account reservoir inflow, water use for people and fish, and other factors.

15. SPU mentions flexibility in the water supply system. Can you talk about this? And what about fish habitat?

Seattle is fortunate to have two main sources of drinking water—the South Fork Tolt and the Cedar Rivers.

In addition, SPU is taking several actions which include preparing pumps that can help access billions of additional gallons of water at Chester Morse Lake Reservoir in the Cedar River watershed and turning on SPU's well field north of Sea-Tac Airport.

All of this gives SPU some flexibility in how they manage the water supply.

In terms of fish habitat, SPU continues to release water from its reservoirs to help with stream flows for fish on the Cedar and South Fork Tolt Rivers. This provides protection for incubating salmon and steelhead trout.

16. Other parts of the state are asking for customers to restrict their use of water. Will SPU be doing this?

SPU is taking prudent steps to manage the water supply during these unusual conditions. At this time, customers are simply being asked to be extra careful in their water use and not waste it. SPU will continue to monitor conditions carefully. And they will communicate any updates on actions requested of all of our customers if conditions change.

17. What is the meaning of the terms ‘conservation’ and ‘curtailment’?

Conservation focuses on long-term, every-year efficiencies which do not affect customers’ customary use of water. SPU and the region offers a number of programs that support and promote conservation. The [Saving Water Partnership website](#) offers a number of helpful tips as well.

Curtailment is the short-term restriction of water usage because of a water supply need. For example, customers could be asked to limit lawn watering or not wash vehicles.