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**March 18, 2021**

## **Southern Utah Elevated to Exceptional Drought, Emergency Status— What Residents and Visitors Need to Know**

With the Southwestern United States in the midst of a major drought, and 90 percent of Utah experiencing extreme drought conditions, Gov. Spencer J. Cox declared a state of emergency March 17 asking all Utah residents to find ways to conserve water. According to the order, soil moisture levels are at their lowest in at least 15 years, in what is already one of the driest states in the nation.

In southern Utah, a popular summer destination, conditions were recently elevated to “exceptional drought” status. With implications for southern Utah residents, visitors and recreators, Central Iron County Water Conservancy District (CICWCD) and Washington County Water Conservancy District (WCWCD) are partnering to issue important information about the drought conditions and recommendations for summer.

Considering the severity of the drought in an already dry, desert climate, coupled with a surge in population growth and tourism, water officials are asking residents to do three things this year to help save water:

1. Wait to irrigate landscapes until needed
2. Fix leaky toilets and faucets
3. Take shorter showers

The National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), [www.drought.gov](http://www.drought.gov), defines “exceptional drought” as the most serious level of drought, and under that classification streamflows are low and ponds are dry, native vegetation is stressed, air quality can be poor because of dust, pasture and water are inadequate for livestock, fire restrictions are strict, and irrigation shares can be reduced.

Since the NIDIS began publishing the U.S. Drought Monitor in 2000, the “most intense period of drought” has been the week of Jan. 19, 2021, when 66.99 percent of the state’s lands were affected by “exceptional drought,” the website reported. The United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural

Resources Conservation Service tracks precipitation amounts each year, and despite recent precipitation its March 18 SNOTEL report showed Southwest Utah at just 63 percent of its average precipitation.

Laura Haskell, Utah Division of Water Resources engineer and drought coordinator, said the Division looks at multiple factors to assess drought in the state, including snow pack, streamflow forecasts, soil moisture and reservoir storage. It uses the U.S. Drought Monitor to compare to previous years. She shared a graphic indicating that the entire state is in a drought, with 57 percent of Utah land experiencing “exceptional drought,” 33 percent of the state in the slightly less serious “extreme drought,” and the other 10 percent in severe or moderate drought.

Central Iron County Water Conservancy District General Manager Paul Monroe said small changes can make a big difference.

“If each person considers their impact and applies at least one water-wise principle, we can realize significant water savings for the region,” he said. “Now more than ever, we must work together to optimize every drop of water in southern Utah.”

Haskell said if people do one thing to conserve, it should be waiting to start irrigating, because the Division believes it will produce the largest water savings of any “single change in behavior.”

“The Division is encouraging conservation, particularly on outdoor landscaping this summer,” she said.

“Eliminating one watering for a typical Utah yard saves about 3,000 gallons of water,” Haskell added. “Spring and fall are the best times to save.”

Monroe said he understands that people are excited for spring and summer and it is tempting to begin running sprinklers and trying to get lawns green again, but waiting is responsible as it promotes root growth and makes landscapes more drought tolerant and water efficient.

Fixing leaks is important, as Haskell said a leaky toilet or faucet can waste about 50 gallons of water a day. For those who would like to replace an old, inefficient toilet, state rebates are available. More information on rebates for toilets and smart irrigation controllers is available at [utahwatersavers.com](http://utahwatersavers.com).

Monroe said consistently taking shorter showers can also make a difference in overall water use in our area, as well as turning off the water while brushing teeth and shaving, and just being conscious about how much water is going down the drain. Residents can also wait to run dishwashers and washing machines until they have a full load.

Programs are available to help those who want to reduce their water consumption.

Residents can use water-smart plants in landscaping and can use more efficient irrigation set-ups. Both the CICWCD and WCWCD encourage residents to participate in a Localscapes class. This class teaches participants how to design landscapes appropriate to the area’s climate. The Localscapes approach helps to create better landscape functionality, less yard maintenance, enhanced curb appeal, lower water bills, and simplified irrigation. The class is available virtually at [www.localscapes.com](http://www.localscapes.com). Those interested can

also have a more personalized experience by attending the Iron County workshop on March 23 and 30. Sign up at [www.cicwcd.org/localscapes](http://www.cicwcd.org/localscapes).

“We have accomplished significant water savings over the last decade, but we can - and should - do more,” said Zach Renstrom, WCWCD general manager. “Simple efforts, like waiting to irrigate landscapes, fixing leaks and taking shorter showers will preserve our water supplies and help us through this drought.”

The WCWCD offers nearly two dozen free classes on a wide range of landscaping and gardening topics (see <https://www.wcwcd.org/events/>) and a variety of rebates to Washington County residents (see <https://www.wcwcd.org/conservation/rebates/>).

The CICWCD and WCWCD are charged with conserving, developing and stabilizing water resources in their respective jurisdictions. The districts educate residents about conservation, reuse and water import strategies as they strive to meet the challenges of limited water resources, climate changes and community growth. Visit [www.cicwd.org](http://www.cicwd.org) or [www.wcwcd.org](http://www.wcwcd.org) for more information.

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#### **Photo Captions:**

**Fix a Leak:** Iron County crews respond to a leak at Cedar Highlands Tank responsible for a loss of 20,000 gallons per day. Actively repairing leaks on personal property is one way to help optimize water in southern Utah. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) a leaky faucet that drips at the rate of 1 drip per second can waste more than 3,000 gallons per year. Photo courtesy Central Iron County Water Conservancy District.

**Exceptional Drought:** Currently, 90 percent of Utah is experiencing extreme drought conditions with southern Utah elevated to exceptional drought status. Photo courtesy Central Iron County Water Conservancy District. Quichapa Lake, southern Utah, Sept. 2020.

**Free Home Water Checks:** Free home lawn water check programs are now available can help identify inefficient water use, and those interested can sign up at [www.cicwcd.org](http://www.cicwcd.org) (Iron County residents) or by calling (435) 673-3617 (Washington County residents).