

Down the Pipeline

How we respond to Drought
Communications

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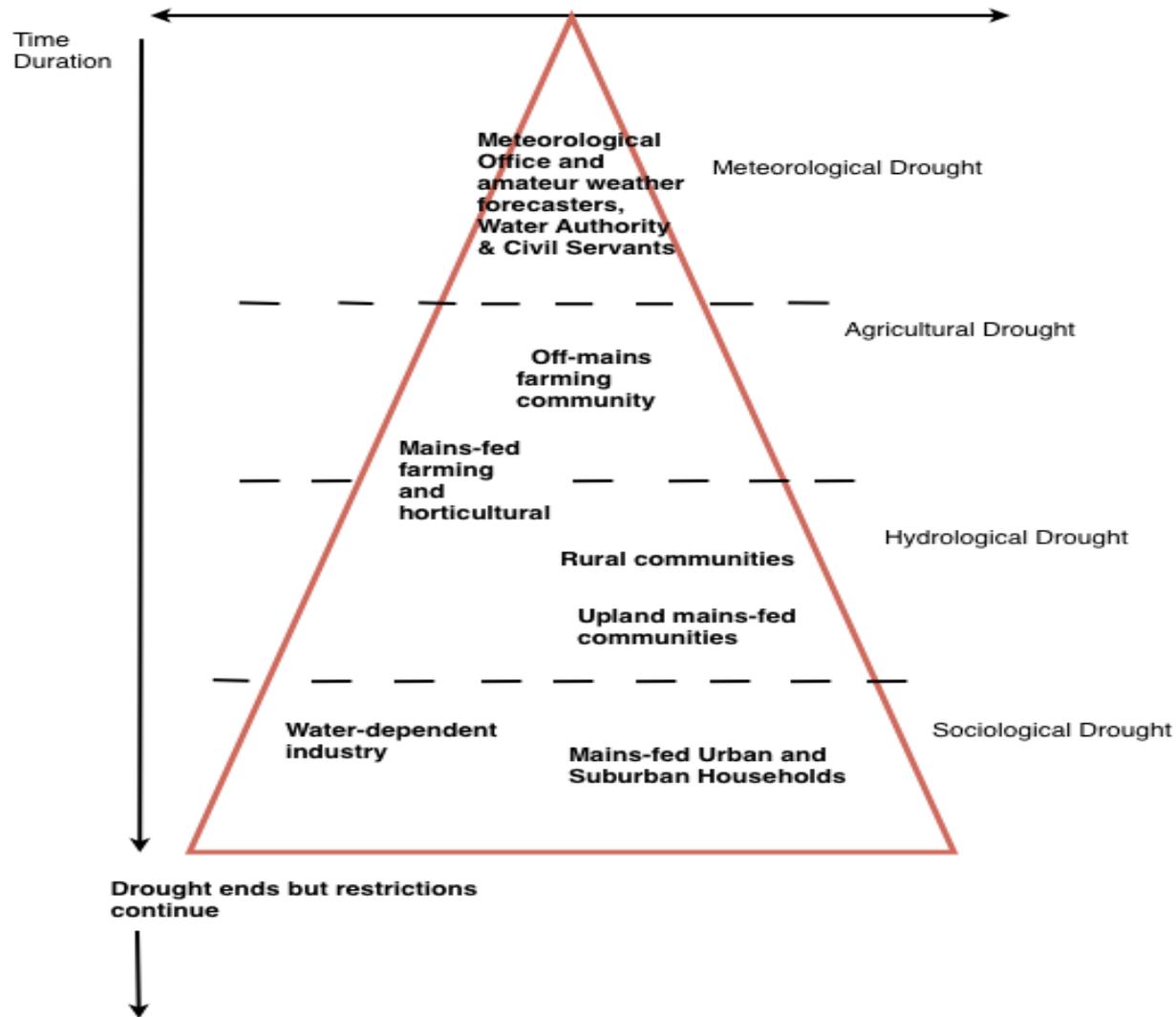


Long Droughts

- Clusters of repeated dry winters – not necessarily hot summers
- Twelve long droughts in England since 1800
- Twice as many long droughts between 1912 and 2012 as between 1812 and 1911
- There have also been some hot summers: 1975 – 1976, 1995 – 1997, 2004 - 2006

Impact of Severe Drought on Sections of UK Society. Inspired by Wilhite and Maslow

Size of affected community



Public Perceptions of Drought

- Three towns:
 - Royal Tunbridge Wells
 - Norwich
 - Barnstaple

June – August 2011

Question - Has the dry spring affected you?

September 2011 – April 2012 Home water use study

Who are the public?

- An assumed collective – not you
- Individuals – including you
- Water customers
- Water wasters
- Gardeners

Do they know anything about hydrology?

Does it matter if they don't?

How are they presented?

- In the media
- In environmental behaviour studies
- In real life

Who gives them a voice?

Why do they need to be heard?

Communication is 2-way

- We expect the public to be both ecological citizens and water customers and there is a conflict between the two.
- Water companies cannot say they may run out of water. That would be commercial suicide.
- Instead the public is asked to “be water wise”
- What does this mean?

- Ethical campaigns are largely ineffective with regard to water use.
- Money saving campaigns may have a greater impact but can backfire
- 20th April 2012, Radio 2, Jeremy Vine Show – Is water running out of your pockets?

2011

- The first dry spring had little impact
- Some impact on gardens but also a very good year for fruit so most gardeners pleased.
- Not many slugs
- No change to water habits apart from some use of grey water for a couple of weeks in driest spell.
- No hosepipe ban = No drought

2012

- 14th February – *Britain Faces Drought Crisis*
Daily Mail

Article mentions low reservoir and groundwater aquifer levels

Trevor Bishop quoted – makes comparison to 1976

Picture of Bewl Water (41% full)

- February 20th – Drought Summit
- 12th March – Hosepipe Ban for Millions

Daily Mail

6th April – Hosepipes actually in force in five water company areas

16th April – Hosepipes in force in 17 water company areas

What the Public Think?

- BBC online article, 16th April – 900 comments
- 720 credible comments
- 19% - There is no drought, it's just a distribution problem caused by bad water company management
- 14% Build a water grid to sort it out
- 12% Population pressure is the cause
- 12% Leaks are the cause

- 8% It's the Government's Fault
- 7% We must pull together to solve the problem
- 6% Universal metering will fix the problem
- 4% Re-nationalise water companies
- 4% I don't care, it makes no difference to me
- 3% Build more reservoirs
- No one blames the weather because by this time it is raining.

The Truth About the Public

- Blind Faith – It will eventually rain (and it does)
- Directly link rain with water availability – not much knowledge of stages in between
- Water companies have already taught them to save water so they cannot use any less, even in a drought
- When a hosepipe ban is threatened, they stockpile water and plan ahead to make sure they won't go without

What should we do next?

- Consider whether it is appropriate talk about hosepipe bans when they are not necessarily going to be enforced
- Think about the publics we are engaging with. What do they already know and what can we say that will not shake their blind belief in the inevitability of rain
- Make it clear where water companies get their product from – nature and position them correctly in the scene