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ICPRB Initiates Drought Operations

The Potomac River flow is dropping and with little rain in the forecast, the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) is ramping up Drought Operations.

The staff of ICPRB's Section for Cooperative Water Supply on the Potomac (CO-OP) announced the flow of the Potomac River has reached a low significant enough to initiate Drought Operations.

According to Dr. Schultz, Director of ICPRB's CO-OP, "Today we are initiating CO-OP Drought Operations, per the Water Supply Coordination Agreement (WSCA) of 1982. According to the WSCA, Drought Operations is triggered when flow in the Potomac River at Little Falls, plus Washington metropolitan area Potomac withdrawals, 'is projected to be less than twice the projected withdrawals for any of the next five days.'"

Dr. Schultz explains that during Drought Operations, CO-OP staff produce twice-daily reports to stakeholders regarding flow, weather, and demand conditions. The staff uses river flow forecasts to determine whether changes in operations are needed to meet upcoming water demands. These include releases from upstream reservoirs, Jennings Randolph and Little Seneca, to augment Potomac River flow.

Before today's announcement, Schultz said CO-OP staff activated drought monitoring last Friday, which entails one daily communication to stakeholders that closely monitors the situation but does not provide recommendations.

Drought monitoring is not uncommon for the drier months of fall. Shultz points out that there was indication of an especially dry summer to come when earlier this spring the Potomac River flow at Point of Rocks dropped below the drought monitoring threshold of 2,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). This is an uncommon occurrence so early in the year.

While Drought Operations are unusual, they are not unprecedented.

"In 1999, a record low June flow was observed in the river and we began Drought Operations. As a result, the first water supply release ever was made from the Jennings Randolph Reservoir over a several-week period, relieving stress from the low flow conditions downstream," explains Michael Nardolilli, Executive Director of ICPRB. Additional reservoir releases were made during the Drought Operations of 2002 and 2010.

According to Nardolilli, "Cooperative operations among the three major water suppliers, with coordination and technical support provided by ICPRB's CO-OP, ensured that sufficient water was always available in the river to meet water supply needs and to maintain the environmental flow recommendations at Great Falls and Little Falls."

As in previous droughts, the CO-OP staff will closely monitor the situation. Dr. Schultz states, "The DC Metro area's water supply is well protected due to decades of careful planning and preparation."

Nardolilli says it is always a good idea to be mindful of our water use. He provides some examples, including turning off the tap when we are not actively using water like when we are brushing our teeth or doing the dishes, running the dishwasher and laundry only when you have a full load, and try to reduce the amount of water we use on landscaping, which is a significant portion of summer water-use.

The ICPRB is an interstate compact commission established by Congress in 1940. Its mission is to protect and enhance the waters and related resources of the Potomac River basin through science, regional cooperation, and education. Represented by appointed commissioners, the ICPRB includes the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the federal government.