# UK faces escalating drought and flood threats risking food security and farming livelihoods



# The Growing Crisis of Drought and Food Security in the UK

An uncharacteristic silence surrounds the lack of rainfall this spring as Britain faces increasing drought warnings. While the populace often basks in the sun, farmers and environmentalists are sounding alarm bells over a dry winter—particularly stark in areas like Northern Ireland where rainfall was a mere 70% of the norm. As crops begin to fail and irrigation is activated much earlier than usual, the National Drought Group convened to discuss the impending crisis. Predictions of warm, sunny weather further aggravate this situation, drawing unsettling parallels to 2022 when farms experienced significant losses due to similar conditions.

Despite the unpredictable nature of British weather—where a record dry June can be swiftly followed by a torrential July—preparations are critical. With drought risk categorised as medium, the Environment Agency has urged the public to limit water consumption. Water companies are being pushed to act, with certain firms already starting repairs on low-capacity reservoirs, especially in northern England where winter precipitation was alarmingly scarce. The prospect of summer hosepipe bans looms as a stark possibility if conditions do not improve.

Compounding these drought concerns are the increased risks of flooding, as highlighted by the Climate Change Committee's recent warnings to Parliament. The dual threat of severe droughts and floods might seem contradictory, yet it underscores the volatile reality of climate change. The committee’s report suggests that despite ambitious policy commitments from the current Labour government, national resilience against such climate extremes has not significantly evolved. Critics have pointed out that water companies' hesitance to invest in new infrastructure—and their reliance on the hope of rain—reflect poor choices stemming from decades of water privatisation. The fallout from this situation is tangible: higher drought risks and polluted waterways are emerging as consequences of neglecting infrastructural investment.

Amidst the potentially catastrophic climate events, the well-being of agriculture cannot be overlooked. As rising flood risks threaten crop viability, various farmers are adjusting by experimenting with new crops; vineyards are appearing across the UK, and the first chickpea harvest has recently been noted. Yet, the cold statistic remains: many traditional winter crops are being compromised by excessive rain, jeopardising harvests. The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit has reported a feared decline of up to a quarter in the UK's wheat harvest due to this year's extreme wet weather, a situation mirroring the preceding summer's drought. Such disturbances in agricultural productivity raise serious concerns about the UK’s food security and self-sufficiency.

Deteriorating conditions have already begun to yield immediate economic repercussions within the farming sector. Farmers in East Anglia are grappling with delayed harvests that could stretch by up to a month courtesy of persistent rain, inflating costs associated with drying crops and affecting overall profitability. The already precarious landscape of farming in England faced a stark 19% decrease in income as floods disrupted harvesting processes. The Met Office corroborated these trends, noting that recent rainfall levels have hit historic highs, exacerbating the issues faced by farmers.

The nexus of climate extremes impacting agricultural viability could well amplify food prices, as highlighted by the NFU chief, Minette Batters, who cautioned that 63% of rivers are now below required levels for sustainable water supply. This foundational issue regarding water storage has remained unaddressed since the privatisation of the water industry in 1989, which has bared the flaws of insufficient infrastructure in the face of changing climate demands.

The urgency to confront both drought and flooding is not just a question of agricultural welfare; it represents a wider challenge of national policy-making and climate action. As the stakes rise for food security, the public must rally support for policies aimed at net-zero emissions and environmental sustainability. The call for holistic, proactive strategies in navigating these climate challenges could be essential for the UK’s agricultural resilience.

The convergence of drought and flood risks offers a sobering reminder of the unpredictable future facing Britain, urging both policymakers and the public to take these warnings seriously as they navigate complex environmental realities.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.inkl.com/news/the-guardian-view-on-drought-warnings-risks-to-the-food-supply-need-confronting> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/23/england-needs-new-reservoirs-food-supplies-nfu-chief-farming-water-shortages> - The National Farmers' Union (NFU) chief Minette Batters has called for the construction of new reservoirs to address water shortages in England. She highlighted that 63% of rivers are below their required levels, emphasizing the urgent need for increased water storage to prevent future droughts and ensure food security. The NFU's concerns are compounded by the fact that no new reservoirs have been built since the privatization of the water industry in 1989, leading to inadequate infrastructure to cope with current demands.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2023-08-07/nightmare-for-farmers-as-wet-weather-delays-harvest-and-drives-up-costs> - Farmers across East Anglia are facing significant challenges due to persistent wet weather, which has delayed harvests by up to a month. The damp conditions have increased costs for drying crops, impacting profitability and potentially leading to higher food prices. The wettest July on record for the region has exacerbated these issues, with farmers expressing concerns over the financial viability of their operations amid the ongoing weather disruptions.
4. <https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/2024/uk-food-security-winter-washout-could-cut-harvests-by-a-fifth> - The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) has released an analysis indicating that the UK's wheat harvest could decline by over a quarter due to unprecedented wet weather. This reduction poses a threat to food security, potentially leading to higher bread prices. The ECIU's findings underscore the impact of extreme weather events on agricultural productivity and the broader implications for the UK's food supply chain.
5. <https://eciu.net/media/press-releases/2024/wet-winter-could-cut-uk-food-self-sufficiency-by-about-a-tenth> - An analysis by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) suggests that the UK's food self-sufficiency could decrease by nearly 10% following a wet winter. The study highlights that the wet conditions have led to lower crop yields and reduced planting areas, raising concerns about the country's ability to meet its food needs domestically and increasing reliance on imports.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/12/floods-fuelled-19-drop-in-income-from-farming-in-england-in-2023> - Income from farming in England dropped by 19% in 2023, primarily due to severe flooding that hindered crop harvesting. The floods, combined with low crop prices, resulted in a 13% decrease in farm output compared to 2022. The Met Office reported that from October 2022 to March 2024, England received 1,695.9mm of rain, the highest in any 18-month period since 1836, underscoring the escalating challenges posed by climate change to the agricultural sector.
7. <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk-drought-farmers-struggle-feed-cattle-cheap-meat-heatwave-1793194> - The UK is experiencing a severe drought that has led to reduced yields of potatoes, onions, and other crops. Farmers are facing challenges in irrigating crops due to water shortages, and livestock farmers are struggling to feed cattle, leading to potential increases in meat prices. The drought's impact on crop yields and livestock feed availability poses significant concerns for the UK's food supply and agricultural economy.