

DROUGHT RESPONSE PLAN

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DROUGHT
RESPONSE
INFORMATION
PROJECT



Introduction

Mesa County is known for its semi-arid, high-desert climate characterized by hot, dry summers, mild winters, low humidity, and more than 300 days of sunshine each year. Because the region receives only 9 to 10 inches of precipitation annually and relies primarily on mountain snowmelt to replenish water supplies, available water resources are inherently limited. Drought is defined as an extended period of below-average precipitation and/or streamflow that stresses water supplies and is a recurring and natural part of Colorado's climate. Throughout Colorado's history, periods of drought have regularly affected water availability, underscoring the importance of proactive planning and responsible water management.

For planning purposes, the City of Grand Junction, Clifton Water District, Town of Palisade, and Ute Water Conservancy District's domestic water supply strategy is to have enough water to meet unrestricted customer usage during a period similar to the 1977, 2002, 2012, 2018, 2020-2021 (back-to-back), 2025, and now 2026 droughts.

No one can predict how long a drought will last or if it will be worse than anticipated. Therefore, the providers must be prepared to recognize drought conditions early and respond appropriately. The Drought Response Plan (DRP) is designed to provide governing boards and city councils with options for addressing a prolonged drought.

The City of Grand Junction, Clifton Water District, and Ute Water Conservancy District have developed a separate Grand Junction Regional Water Efficiency Plan. The Grand Junction Regional Water Efficiency Plan is tied to the Drought Response Plan through implementation of the stated water conservation goals, providing data and results of the efforts identified in the Drought Response Plan.

The Drought Response Information Project (DRIP) Committee was formed to provide public education on responsible water use and conservation. The committee is represented by the four domestic water providers: the City of Grand Junction, Clifton Water District, the Town of Palisade, and Ute Water Conservancy District. The committee also includes CSU Extension Tri River Area Horticulture Program, Grand Valley Irrigation Company, and Orchard Mesa Irrigation District. CSU Extension provides research-based information on landscaping, irrigation, waterwise landscaping, and appropriate maintenance best suited to the Grand Valley.

The Drought Response Plan (DRP) has been developed and revised through ongoing efforts, funded by the City of Grand Junction, the Clifton Water District, and the Ute Water Conservancy District. The DRP includes, but is not limited to, the following items:

- Acquaint customers with measures that one or more of the domestic water providers may adopt or implement, including declaration of Drought Watch or Requested Actions, which occurs through media coverage, social media, campaigns, projects, public outreach, etc.
- Continuation of the Drought Response Information Project (DRIP) activities, which provide public education through community involvement and all forms of media on why and how to reduce per capita consumption.

- ☐ During the monthly meetings of the DRIP Committee, review water supply projections, current reservoir capacities, and ongoing conservation efforts.
- ☐ Utilize the DRIP Committee to activate ideas and concepts agreed upon by the participating domestic providers.
- ☐ Develop campaign proclamations to alert the public to the need to conserve water.
- ☐ Publish “water waste reduction” suggestions for households and aggressively promote reduction by including recommendations via water bills, websites, social media, billboards, and Public Service Announcements.
- ☐ Monitor potential drought response effectiveness; recommend adjustments as needed to the Governing Boards and Council, and report to the public regularly.
- ☐ Coordinate with Mesa County officials and provide updates on local drought conditions and efforts to promote reduction.
- ☐ Ensure that adequate irrigation water will be available throughout the irrigation season by communicating with the irrigation districts and companies.
- ☐ Examine all municipal and county code provisions that affect water usage, such as landscape standards, stormwater management best practices, building code provisions, and, if appropriate, recommend amending applicable code provisions to reduce water consumption.
- ☐ Encourage all public institutions and organizations to take the lead in evaluating indoor and outdoor water use practices. Parks, open spaces, medians, golf courses, fountains, etc., will be asked to evaluate current consumption and provide recommendations for redesign or operational changes to reduce consumption.
- ☐ Meet with community members and groups to convey messages of basic water conservation and local drought conditions.
- ☐ Encourage customer classes utilizing research-based methods provided by [CSU Extension](#) to evaluate, redesign, and reconstruct existing landscapes and outdoor water uses to reduce overall consumption.
- ☐ Train customer service and field service employees to respond to conservation-related questions and provide meaningful and appropriate information. This includes training for:
 - Recognizing and/or monitoring of outdoor water use.
 - Offer suggestions to customers on water-wise use.
 - Identify and work with high-volume water users to reduce their monthly consumption.
- ☐ Highlight unusually high use on customers’ bills. Contact these high-water-use customers to gather their ideas and suggestions for achieving long-term reductions (golf courses, parks, hospitals, schools, government).
- ☐ Suggest water-use surveys (comprehensive water use analyses) for high-volume water users in all customer categories and advise them on ways to reduce water use and, where appropriate, suggest retrofit devices.
- ☐ Recognize and promote Tributary Award recipients and Garden in a Box customers who have implemented waterwise and drought-tolerant landscapes for customers to gain ideas.
- ☐ Encourage waterwise and low-water consumption practices.

Drought Response Plan

The [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) will guide Grand Valley drought declarations and in determining the appropriate encouraged, recommended, or requested actions for domestic providers to consider. The U.S. Drought Monitor is produced jointly by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The U.S. Drought Monitor provides a consistent, big-picture view of drought conditions across the United States. When referencing the U.S. Drought Monitor, it's important to remember that it's often used to identify likely areas of drought impacts, including water shortage, but decision-makers in many circumstances have successfully taken measures to reduce vulnerability to drought. Large urban water systems generally have diverse water supplies and can maintain water flow in both dry and wet years. The U.S. Drought Monitor is not intended to replace assessments or guidance from local water systems on whether residents should conserve water. Figure 1 shows the U.S. Drought Monitor Categories.

Figure 1

Category	Description	Possible Impacts
D0	Abnormally Dry	Going into drought: short-term dryness slowing planting, growth of crops or pastures; fire risk above average. Coming out of drought: some lingering water deficits; pastures or crops not fully recovered.
D1	Moderate Drought	Some damage to crops and pastures; fire risk is high; streams, reservoirs, or wells are low; some water shortages are developing or are imminent; voluntary water-use restrictions are requested.
D2	Severe Drought	Crop or pasture losses likely; fire risk very high; water shortages common; water restrictions imposed.
D3	Extreme Drought	Major crop/pasture losses; extreme fire danger; widespread water shortages or restrictions.
D4	Exceptional Drought	Exceptional and widespread crop/pasture losses; exceptional fire risk; shortages of water in reservoirs, streams, and wells, creating water emergencies.

Many of the encouraged, recommended, and requested activities and actions, as further detailed in Appendices A and B, are considered ongoing regardless of the drought category. These activities and actions are continually developed and are generally based on the Grand Valley's climate and geography. They are activities and actions that domestic water providers may implement individually or, through the DRIP Committee, collectively.

Drought Category Actions

Public Awareness (D0-D2)

Water Conservation Messaging

- ☐ A DRIP Committee-led local drought awareness campaign that provides current Mesa County drought conditions and water-saving tips for customers.
- ☐ The DRIP Committee attends major public events year-round to educate the community about drought. Its presence also helps residents recognize local water providers' efforts and know where to turn for information during a drought.

Drought Watch (D2-D3)

Ongoing Intensive Water Conservation Efforts

- ☐ 1977, 2002, 2012, 2018, 2020-2021 (back-to-back), 2025, and 2026, but include substantial impacts to the source waters of one or more domestic water providers. Statewide drought conditions may or may not exist and affect area irrigation providers.
- ☐ Some water use reductions are anticipated due to customers following encouraged, recommended, and requested actions.

For example, the 2002 drought prompted a statewide drought declaration and affected local water supplies in the following ways:

- *By mid-July, Ute Water Conservancy District's primary water source, the Lower Molina Power Plant, was no longer producing tailrace water, and Vega Reservoir did not fill.*
- *The City of Grand Junction's Purdy Mesa and Juniata Reservoirs began the summer about 75% full, with roughly 1,100 acre-feet of municipal water available on Grand Mesa.*
- *The Historic Users Pool (HUP) received about 75% to 80% of its full allocation but still had enough water for the full irrigation season.*

During the back-to-back drought years of 2020-2021:

- *Ute Water Conservancy District anticipated a strong possibility of back-to-back drought years following the heavy reliance on Plateau Creek in 2020. The threat of back-to-back drought years materialized in 2021, prompting the District to draw on its Colorado River sources, which helped maintain storage in the Jerry Creek reservoirs at 75% or higher.*
- *The Historic Users Pool (HUP) received approximately 100% of the full allocation and had water for the duration of both irrigation seasons.*

Requested Water Reduction Actions (D3-D4)

Consideration, implementation, and adoption of requested water reductions and/or drought rates

Domestic water providers recognize that each develops, operates, and maintains systems and water sources in accordance with its own policies, philosophies, and legal structures, including those adopted and implemented by governing boards and city councils. As such, actions and activities selected for implementation in a D4 drought category involving requested water reduction(s) and/or drought rates shall be determined individually by the domestic provider.

- ☐ A domestic water provider's water supply is at or near minimum target levels for storage or stream flows, requiring drastic water conservation measures and an overall reduction in system-wide demand to ensure water needs for most essential uses are met.
- ☐ An individual domestic provider's decision or a collective decision by multiple domestic providers to implement requested water reduction actions will be dependent on several factors, including those specific to each domestic provider.
- ☐ During requested water reduction actions, the DRIP Committee will continue meeting monthly and increase meetings as needed. All water supplies, whether storage or stream flows, will be closely monitored, and requested actions from the community will be tailored to communicate the severity of the conditions.
- ☐ If the Historic Users Pool (HUP) is expected to receive less than its full entitlement and irrigation providers are anticipating they will not be able to stretch available water supplies throughout the entire irrigation season, domestic water providers may be required to take stronger action to ensure domestic supplies are not overburdened due to increased outdoor irrigation use of potable domestic water, and shall be determined individually by the domestic provider.
- ☐ If irrigation providers' water is jeopardized and the demand is added to or anticipated in the domestic water demand, it could cause both treatment and capacity delivery problems. Individual thresholds for moving toward requested water reductions for each domestic water provider shall be determined by that provider and adjusted as timing, weather, and demand dictate.
- ☐ The threat of a back-to-back drought affects the ability of the domestic providers to recover from impacts to water supplies, including available storage, stream flows, and/or alternative source waters, and an overall reduction in system-wide demand to ensure future water supply is necessary.

Increasing Water Supply and Decreasing Water Use

Increasing Water Supply

Domestic water providers may augment their water supply from other sources to increase it. There are several options for doing this, each presenting its own set of intergovernmental, legal, and technical considerations that shall be determined individually by the domestic provider. Among the possibilities are:

- ☐ Call back water rights that others are using, including ranch lessees and water rentals
- ☐ Augment raw water sources through secondary sources
- ☐ Seek approval from federal and state agencies to allow diversion and use of irrigation water decrees if available
- ☐ Obtain municipal water contracts from federal projects if available
- ☐ In the short term, collective use of water rights is both legally and physically available to be conveyed through established interconnects

Decreasing Water Use

The ideal drought response is to allocate water to the most essential uses depending on the severity of drought conditions. Appendices A and B include a wide variety of options for encouraging or requesting a reduction in water use. In general, reductions are expected to be voluntary and achieved through the encouraged, recommended, or requested actions and activities outlined in these appendices.

The need for implementation of drought rates, restrictions, and/or mandatory reductions will be determined by the individual domestic water provider and its governing board or city council

Customer and Community Drought Actions

Specific details on drought response actions for customers and the community are in Appendix A.

D1

Water Conservation Messaging

- Develop a foundation of procedure and education on water conservation and local drought conditions.
- Encourage residential water conservation techniques.

D2

Encouraged Water Conservation

- Conditions force water conservation efforts to expand beyond the household and into the community.

D3

Advised Water Reduction

- High water users are targeted to look for water-saving changes
- Water reduction goals are set to help implement the foundational habits and education developed in D1 and D2

D4

Requested Water Reduction

- Governing bodies speak to the severity of the conditions and implement appropriate actions for their organization.

Domestic Water Provider Drought Actions

Specific details on drought response actions for domestic water providers are in Appendix B.

D1

Water Conservation Messaging

- There is a heavy focus on community involvement and awareness of the Drought Response Information Project (DRIP) and water conservation.
- A strong foundation of education and drought procedure is developed.

D2

Encouraged Water Conservation

- Homeowners' Associations and smaller communities are asked to act as a governing body to help conserve water within their associations and communities and recommend water conservation to their members.

D3

Advised Water Reduction

- Partnerships are established and exercised to intensify the severity of the drought conditions and offer resources to the community to help conserve water.
- The execution of getting the drought message out is intensified through communication efforts and campaigns.
- Leadership within the community is heavily relied on to help push water conservation and community-wide water reduction.

D4

Requested Water Reduction

- Due to the severity of the conditions, drought rates may be implemented and penalties activated for those exercising wasteful water practices or to protect water supply from anticipated increased demand as a result of irrigation water shortages.
- A community movement is established to intensify the need for water conservation.

Public Outreach

During a drought, it is essential that area water providers communicate effectively not only with their customers but also with other area water suppliers, local governments, and other groups that may be affected by this drought response.

Summary

This plan is intended to help staff, customers, stakeholders, and governing boards and councils be better prepared for drought. Although the options listed in the DRP are based on lessons learned, it is important to understand that every drought is different and that each governing board and city council may adjust and refine measures based on actual drought conditions. When necessary, the measures will also be adjusted and refined in accordance with each domestic provider's policies, philosophies, and legal structures.

Appendix A

Suggested Customers and Community Drought Actions

Public Awareness (D0-D1)

Water Conservation Messaging

- ☐ Encourage education on water-efficient practices
 - Rain barrels
 - Direct downspouts
 - Evaporative coolers
 - Drip irrigation
 - Performing lawn water audits
 - Proper turf maintenance
- ☐ Encourage education in landscaping
 - Transitioning lawns to water-wise or low-water
 - Garden In a Box/Native Plant implementation programs
 - Caring for landscape during each season
 - Caring for landscape during drought
 - Recommend low-water, water-wise, or climate-adapted landscapes
- ☐ Encourage efficient watering practices
 - Encourage HOAs to adopt an outdoor watering schedule
 - Encourage use of Suggested Outdoor Watering Schedule
 - Encourage watering before 6:00 AM and after 10:00 PM
- ☐ Encourage the community to educate others on smart water usage and conservation techniques

Drought Watch (D2)

Ongoing Intensive Water Conservation Efforts

- ☐ Recommend that customers and communities continue D1 actions
- ☐ Recommend that high-water users make water conservation efforts
 - Recommend hotels, motels, inns, and bed & breakfast establishments implement low-flow fixtures
 - Help customers understand available leak detection tools, real-time water use monitoring options, and rebate programs offered by their water provider.
 - Promote protection of available watershed resources through proactive management, including wildfire mitigation techniques.
- ☐ Recommend alternative methods to avoid water waste
 - Recommend other ways to wash vehicles
 - Recommend the removal of high-water landscapes
 - Recommend use of incentivized/rebate programs, dependent on individual domestic provider
 - Turf replacement programs
 - Smart irrigation rebates
 - Indoor appliance rebates
 - Graywater infrastructure installation
- ☐ Recommend proper maintenance of potential water-wasting practices

- Educate public pools and homeowners with private pools on efficient operation for in-ground and above-ground pools
- Educate customers on evaporative cooler maintenance and operation
- Recommend cutting back on street cleaning, sidewalk, and driveway washing, except for toxic or hazardous substances or where public health and safety issues can only be resolved by washing the impermeable surface

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Drought Watch/Requested Water Reduction (D3)

Ongoing Intensive Water Conservation Efforts/Consideration, implementation, and adoption of requested water reductions and/or drought rates

- Request that customers and communities continue D1 and D2 actions
- Request high-water users eliminate common sources of wasting water
 - Request that hotels/motels ask guests to reuse sheets and towels during their stay
 - Request that restaurants only serve water upon request
- Request that ornamental fountains in buildings and parks be turned off
- Request conservation leadership from government entities
 - Request domestic providers and other local, state, and federal government entities to reduce their own domestic water use by 30% of the last five-year average
- Request the community to participate in limited residential outdoor watering
 - Request that large areas of turf be watered 25% less than evapotranspiration full requirements
 - Request customers hand-water trees and shrubs while reducing turf and lawn watering
- Provide information and assistance to customers for post-drought planning
 - Landscaping properly
 - Transitioning into a Xeriscape, Garden In A Box, waterwise, or low-water landscaping
 - Low-flow fixtures
- Request homeowners not to fill private swimming pools and ornamental fountains
 - Request pools to be covered when not in use

Requested Water Reduction (D4)

Consideration, implementation, and adoption of requested water reductions and/or drought rates

- Require customers and communities to continue D1, D2, and D3 actions
- Implementation of drought/emergency water rates is at individual water providers' discretion
- Implementation of individual water providers' drought response plans may be activated

Appendix B

Suggested Domestic Water Providers' Drought Actions

Public Awareness (D0-D1)

Water Conservation Messaging

- ☐ Maintain monthly DRIP Committee meetings
- ☐ Encourage consistency of drought messages, conservation techniques, and drought education through all domestic water providers
 - Training of public-facing staff for general drought questions and information (Customer Service, Meter Readers, etc.)
 - All domestic water providers will include similar messaging on billing statements, websites, social media, etc.
- ☐ Encourage drought awareness and education through community involvement
 - Adopt Xeriscape, Colorado-scape, or Garden In A Box demonstration gardens in high-traffic areas
 - Provide school demonstrations and audits
 - Partner with Grand Valley welcoming groups to educate new residents
 - Partner with home-improvement stores and local nurseries to ensure proper equipment and plants are being purchased
 - Develop a leadership summit/conference on water conservation
 - Acknowledge water-wise and low-water-use landscapes through the DRIP Committee's "Tributary Awards"
 - Partner with School District #51 and Colorado Mesa University sustainability groups/clubs to educate students through presentations and install low-flow fixtures
- ☐ Encourage structure and the development of resources for water providers to consistently use and exercise, regardless of drought conditions
 - Maintain a drought monitor that can be regularly updated and displayed (Physically in all domestic water providers' offices and on social media, websites, billing statements, etc.)
 - Create information stations at each utility office
 - Create a "Main Shut-off Valve" campaign
 - Encourage new construction to be waterwise, low-water, Coloradoscape, or Grandscape
 - Invite irrigators to participate in DRIP Committee meetings
 - Develop a procedure for each domestic water provider to provide regular status updates
 - Partner with municipalities to discuss water savings programs (Parks & Recreation, City of Fruita, golf courses, school campuses, etc.)

Drought Watch (D2)

Ongoing Intensive Water Conservation Efforts

- ☐ Recommend that domestic water providers continue D1 actions
- ☐ Recommend high-water users to make water conservation efforts by communicating

about water-smart usage

- ☐ Promote the Suggested Outdoor Watering Schedule
- ☐ Monitor drought response effectiveness and recommend adjustments to governing boards and city councils
- ☐ Partner with Homeowners' Associations to reach more users
 - Develop regulations on turf requirements
 - Perform audits, if applicable in the service area, or promote Lawn Irrigation Self Audit toolkits through [CSU Extension](#), or the consultation of a Qualified Water Efficient Landscape professional, while encouraging water conservation on common areas

Drought Watch/Requested Water Reduction (D3)

Ongoing Intensive Water Conservation Efforts/Consideration, implementation, and adoption of requested water reductions and/or drought rates

- ☐ Recommend that domestic water providers continue D1 and D2 actions
- ☐ Increase monthly DRIP meetings as needed
- ☐ Increase and heavily promote the Suggested Outdoor Watering Schedule
- ☐ Intensify the drought message
 - Localize the drought conditions for chain businesses
 - Contract with an advertising agency to carry out an intense drought campaign
 - Coordinate with high-wind advisories when wind speeds create ineffective watering conditions
 - Provide regular media briefings on drought conditions
- ☐ Intensify water conservation leadership
 - Adopt Homeowner's Associations to invest in and test water-saving devices
 - Encourage Colorado Mesa University to develop an on-campus drought campaign
 - Partner with residents to encourage the use of rain barrels
- ☐ Issue notices and publicize water usage
 - Publicize authorized smart water usage
 - Send direct communication reminders of drought conditions to the top ten percent of residential and commercial water users

Requested Water Reduction (D4)

Consideration, implementation, and adoption of requested water reductions and/or drought rates

- ☐ Increase DRIP Committee and leadership meetings as needed
- ☐ Require drought resources for the community
 - Depending on the intensity and duration of the drought, it could qualify to stand up a Joint Information System (JIS) through the Mesa County JIS
- ☐ Implementation of drought/emergency water rates is at individual water providers' discretion
- ☐ Implementation of individual water providers' drought response plans may be activated