

Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force – Meeting Summary

March 6, 2026, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm conducted remotely via Zoom

Attendees, Drought Management Task Force Members:

Vandana Rao, Co-Chair, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA)
Benjamin Hiltunen, Co-Chair, Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA)
Duane LeVangie, Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP), Water Management Act
Jen Pederson, Massachusetts Water Works Association (MWWA)
Lydia Olson, Massachusetts Rivers Alliance (MRA)
Viki Zoltay, Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), Office of Water Resources (OWR)
Anne Carroll, DCR OWR
Dalene LaPointe, Department of Public Health (DPH)
Rob Megnia, NOAA – National Weather Service (NWS)
Moussa Siri, Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee (WSCAC)
Alex Taylor, Department of Public Utilities (DPU)
John Gregoire, Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA)
Nick Stasulis, United States Geological Survey (USGS)
Kate Bentsen, Department of Fish and Game (DFG), Division of Ecological Restoration
Adam Kautza, DFG, MassWildlife
Thomas Maguire, MassDEP

Other Attendees:

Bailey Mullins	DCR OWR	Justine Kent-Uritam	Town of Dover
Brittany Segill	MassDEP	Melissa Nowitz	Concord Water
Cody Jones	Sunderland Water District	Michael Blanchard	Town of Dover
Crystal Stiles	CIRES/NOAA NIDIS	Michael Souza	MEMA
Elizabeth McCann	MassDEP	Mike Retzky	Town of Needham
Emilia Dick Fiora del Fabro	Charles River Watershed Association	Pine duBois	Jones River Watershed Association
Erin Graham	DCR OWR	Purvi Patel	EEA
Giovanna Recinos	City of Salem	Rob Faley	Town of Chatham
Grace Manning	EEA/DCR Intern	Sara Cohen	DCR OWR
Heather Stayton	City of Westfield	Seth St. Pierre	EEA/DCR Intern
Jack Collins	Oak Bluffs Water District	Steve Cusick	Town of Needham
Jason Duff	DCR OWR	Tim Pasakarnis	Cape Cod Commission
		Toni Stewart	DCR OWR

1. Introduction

Rao called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m. and thanked everyone for attending. She asked attendees to enter their names and affiliations in the chat and reminded them that the meeting was being recorded for the purpose of meeting notes. She introduced herself and co-chair from MEMA, Ben Hiltunen. Rao noted the concerns from the public and media surrounding how the state can be in a drought despite the significant snow. She explained that the Task Force should consider ways to communicate and educate people on this topic to maintain trust for the drought monitoring/declaration process. Rao also noted that next week is Groundwater Awareness Week and staff will be working on some educational messaging. Lastly, Rao explained that Task Force presentations are not currently getting posted on the web due to issues with presentations meeting accessibility standards. Anyone wanting to see copies of the Task Force presentations should reach out to her or other staff until the accessibility issues can be worked out.

2. Approval of January 9 and February 10, 2026 DMTF Meeting Notes

There was a motion by Pederson to accept the January 9 notes with a second by Carroll. The vote to accept was unanimous of those present. There was a requested edit to the February 10 notes which included adding a comment by Pederson on the need to consider using an SPI lookback period in between the 12-month and the 24-month periods for Regions experiencing drought for longer than 12 months. Pederson made a motion to accept as amended with a second by Zoltay. The vote to accept was unanimous of those present.

3. Updates on Current Conditions and Impacts

Weather & Forecast: Rob Megnia – NOAA National Weather Service (also representing the Northeast River Forecasting Center)

February brought 1-4" precipitation accumulations across the Commonwealth. Departures ranged from 1 to 2 inches below normal. Snow Water Equivalent was generally 2-6" with some higher/lower amounts. The 3-month precipitation totals are generally 80-100% of normal with 60-80% more common across western MA. The 6-month precipitation totals are generally 60-80% across eastern MA and 40-60% across western MA. The 7-day outlook is favorable for appreciable rainfall (0.75 – 1.5"). The outlook beyond 7 days is leaning toward near or above normal precipitation. The streamflow is expected to increase over the next 10 days with several river forecast points possibly exceeding action or minor flood stage.

Hydrologic: Nick Stasulis – USGS

USGS currently has limited data-visualization products. Streamflow data is also limited in February due to ice. Streamflow conditions declined further in February except for parts of the CT River and Southeast Drought Regions. Lowest conditions were in the Northeast and Cape Regions. Groundwater levels continued their decline at nearly every Climate Response Network well, relative to seasonal normals. Only 11% of the wells were in the normal (or higher) range by late February, and 43% of wells were below the 5th percentile.

Water Supply: Duane LeVangie – MassDEP

Milford Water Department now has an Emergency Declaration due to a combination of PFAS issues and ongoing drought conditions. MassDEP is not aware of any other drought-related impacts to water supplies. DuBois asked if Brockton was still under an emergency declaration. LeVangie answered that Brockton did not get an emergency declaration through MassDEP, but they implemented restrictions in response to conditions of their WMA registration and the Region's drought status according to the state declaration. Brockton's recent purchasing of water from Aquaria for a period of time was their own decision.

Water Supply: John Gregoire – MWRA

Quabbin is at 81.2% full, which is just below normal and it will likely remain there until the snowpack melts. The Quabbin transfer to Wachusett was initiated due to low levels in Wachusett. The target is to get Wachusett back to the normal winter band and then the transfer will be shut off. The transfer from Quabbin to Wachusett is part of the reason that Quabbin is slightly below normal. Despite the transfer, levels are starting to increase in the Quabbin. Precipitation throughout the MWRA watersheds is still below the 5-year, 10-year, and long-term averages. There is about 3.2 inches of snow water equivalent (SWE) in the Wachusett watershed and about 3.7 inches of SWE in the Quabbin watershed. Sudbury is in its normal winter band and Foss Reservoir is being refilled now that the winter drawdown for invasive species control has been completed.

Water Supply: Jennifer Pederson – MWWA

No suppliers have reported concerns.

Private Water Supply: Marco Pareto – DPU

Not present at the meeting but sent updates via email. Aquarion Water Company's water usage restrictions have been updated based on the February 11 Drought Task Force status update. Current restrictions are as follows:

- Millbury and Oxford Customers: Drought Level 2 (All non-essential outdoor water uses are banned).
- Dover Customers: Drought Level 2 (Nonessential outdoor water use is allowed one day per week).
- Pinehills Customers: Drought Level 2 (Nonessential outdoor water use is allowed two days per week).

Wetlands: Tom Maguire – DEP

No concerns reported regarding drought.

Fish and Game: Kate Bentsen – DER; Adam Kautza – DFG

No updates to report.

Massachusetts Rivers Alliance: Lydia Olson

Mass Rivers received updates from watershed groups on Cape Cod and the South Coastal. There was a report from the Association to Preserve Cape Cod regarding low flows in the Quashnet River on Cape Cod. There was a verbal report from the Jones River Watershed Association that Silver Lake is down 28 inches, which is a slight improvement from last month but still significantly low. There are concerns over fish migrations in the spring if levels stay so low.

Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee: Moussa Siri

Siri visited four sites around the Quabbin and CT River Valley, including Atherton Brook, Swift River Middle Branch, Swift River East Branch, and Connecticut River at Sunderland. At all four sites, he saw increased flow compared to previous recent site visits.

Agricultural: Michael Botelho – DAR

Not present at meeting.

Fire Danger: Karyn Lothrop – DCR

Not present at meeting.

Engineering: John Scannell – DCR

Not present at meeting.

Public Health: Dalene LaPointe – DPH

No updates to report.

4. Presentation of Index Severity Levels per MA DMP

Zoltay reviewed how DMP indices and severity levels were calculated, as well as the drought regions. She traced recent hydrologic trends, noting that the drought began in mid-August 2024 and worsened through mid-October, resulting in record low streamflows. Precipitation in late November provided temporary relief, and December's normal to above normal precipitation improved conditions. However, January's below normal precipitation caused declines again. Recovery in streamflow and groundwater began in March and April, except on the Cape and Islands. By mid-May, significant recovery had occurred across most of the state, and by the end of May there was above normal precipitation and more improvement overall across the state. In June/July, conditions were mixed, with some areas drying out and various recovery across the state. August 2025 brought significantly lower precipitation and worsening drought conditions. September brought continued low streamflow and impacts to groundwater, despite mostly normal precipitation (except for the Islands). In October, the state received beneficial precipitation and some modest recovery resumed. November was mostly status quo except for some recovery in the Western Region. December brought below normal to normal precipitation and continued impacts to streamflow and groundwater. Precipitation was normal in January, but it was tied up in snow and so there have been continued impacts to streamflow and groundwater. The most recent U.S. Drought Monitor shows worsening conditions, primarily with drought expanding in the west and southeast.

The Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) for February was mostly below normal. There is up to 12 inches of precipitation deficit across the state. Despite receiving up to three feet of snow in the recent storm, the water equivalent of that snow is only about 2.5 inches at the temperatures experienced during the storm. Zoltay explained that in the final summary table, different lookback periods would be used for different Regions based on the duration of their current drought conditions (2-month for Western, 3-month for Southeast, 9-month for CTRV, Central, and Northeast, and 12-month for Cape Cod and the Islands). Considering these lookback periods, the SPI ranged from ISL 0 to ISL 3 across the state. Several stream gages are iced out and not reporting. For those reporting, streamflow is mostly below normal, with some record low levels in the eastern part of the state. Streamflow ranges from ISL 2 to ISL 4, depending on the Region. Groundwater is also mostly below normal, ranging from ISL 1 to ISL 3. Lakes and Impoundments are mostly below normal, except for the one reservoir that reported from the Western Region which is 100% full. Evapotranspiration and KBDI are not monitored during this time of year.

5. Discussion of Drought Level Recommendations by Region

Western – Conditions have worsened, with precipitation, streamflow, and groundwater all below normal. The staff recommendation was to move to Level 1. There was discussion on the fact that the current conditions are pointing toward Level 2 and Regions have jumped two levels during rapid onset droughts in the past. It was also noted that there was missing streamflow data last month and therefore this Region might have been experiencing Level 1 conditions last month despite the declaration for Level 0. There was also discussion surrounding the pattern in recent years of Regions moving in and out of drought more frequently. There was discussion on how to handle situations in which certain locations remain impacted despite Regional averages showing recovery, and how these situations might lead to moving parts of the

state out of drought that are still experiencing drought conditions. Rao asked Task Force members to consider this aspect and any adjustments to the monitoring process that could be warranted.

There was also discussion on the significant snowpack that will be melting soon which will likely improve streamflow and the need to balance declaration with communicating conditions to the public. However, it was acknowledged that this could be a short-term improvement if precipitation remains below normal and if the frozen ground prevents groundwater recharge.

After discussion, Task Force recommendations were mixed, with votes ranging from keeping at Level 0 to moving to Level 2. Moving the Western Region to Level 1 – Mild Drought received the most votes.

Connecticut River Valley (CTRV) – Precipitation and streamflow have both decreased significantly, and groundwater and lakes/impoundments are also below normal. The staff recommendation was to move to Level 2. All Task Force members agreed to recommend moving to Level 2 – Significant Drought.

Central – Conditions have also worsened in the Central Region, with groundwater and streamflow both at ISL 3. The staff recommendation was to move to Level 3. All Task Force members agreed to recommend moving to Level 3 – Critical Drought.

Northeast – This Region is experiencing very concerning conditions for all indices, with streamflow at ISL 4 and all other indices at ISL 3. The staff recommendation was to move to Level 3. All Task Force members agreed to recommend moving to Level 3 – Critical Drought.

Southeast – Conditions have worsened to some extent, with streamflow at ISL 3, but all other indices are at ISL 2. The staff recommendation was to hold at Level 2 and see how conditions respond in the next month. All Task Force members agreed to recommend holding at Level 2 – Significant Drought.

Cape Cod – Conditions have worsened on the Cape, with streamflow and lakes/impoundments at ISL 3 and groundwater and precipitation below normal as well. The staff recommendation was to hold at Level 2. There was discussion on the possibility of moving to Level 3, but after discussion members agreed that because of the relatively few data points for streamflow and lakes/impoundments, it would be better to wait and see how groundwater trends over the next month. All Task Force members agreed to recommend holding at Level 2 – Significant Drought.

Islands – The islands would be considered separately again. Nantucket saw some improvement in groundwater, while Duke’s County is still mostly normal. The staff recommendation was to hold Duke’s County at Level 0 – Normal Conditions and improve Nantucket to Level 2 – Significant Drought. All Task Force members agreed to hold Duke’s at Level 0 with the exception of one vote to recommend moving to Level 1 – Mild Drought. All Task Force members agreed to recommend an improvement on Nantucket to Level 2 – Significant Drought.

Summary of Recommendations:

Southeast: Level 2 – Significant Drought

Northeast: Level 3 – Critical Drought

CTRV: Level 2 – Significant Drought

Central: Level 3 – Critical Drought

Western: Level 1 – Mild Drought

Cape Cod: Level 2 – Significant Drought

Islands: Duke’s County- Level 0 – Normal Conditions; Nantucket County- Level 2 – Significant Drought

6. Recommendations for Drought Level Response Actions

Rao summarized the recommendations for drought levels that had been discussed throughout the meeting. The press release and other communications should come out early next week. She asked for suggestions on messaging given the confusing conditions with a lot of snow yet the state is still in drought. Gregoire recommended communicating that it takes time for streamflow and groundwater to recover during the upcoming snowmelt. Pederson recommended acknowledging that temperatures are expected to be warm next week so the snowmelt will be very evident to the public. Kent-Uritam advised that the public is mostly focused on reservoir levels, so communicating Quabbin levels on a monthly basis could be helpful. She also noted that most people don’t understand aquifer levels and how groundwater and streamflow respond to snowmelt and other precipitation patterns. Pederson suggested the state do more messaging to the meteorologists, which is where most people are going to get their news on this topic. Gregoire noted that MWRA does have a press release on their website explaining the ongoing drought conditions.

7. Next Steps

The recommendations will be shared with the Secretary of EEA for a final decision on updated drought declarations. The Task Force will meet again in early April. Rao may convene the Interagency Drought Mission Group since two areas of the state are at Level 3 – Critical Drought.

Meeting Ended: The meeting adjourned at 12:01 pm.