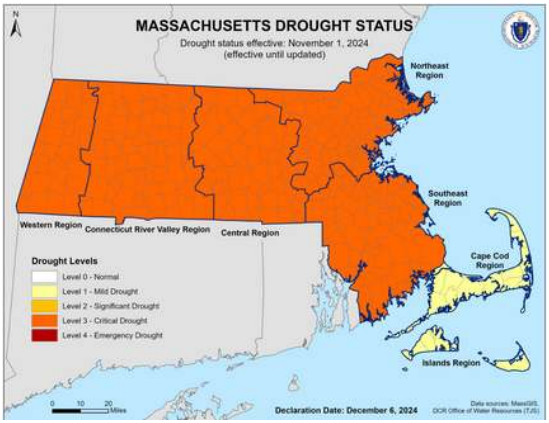
Last year, Massachusetts experienced severe statewide drought. Let's pass the drought bill for more climate-resilient drought management.

H.1003 / S.586

Sponsored by Rep. Joan Meschino, Rep. Dave Rogers & Sen. Jamie Eldridge

Our current approach to drought management is a confusing patchwork of conservation measures that have limited impact. One municipality may impose stringent measures while its neighboring may require minimal water conservation, even though both withdraw water from the same struggling basin.



Dry bed of the Hoppin Hill Reservoir, North Attleborough. July 2022. Jill Miller

How Drought Impacts Massachusetts:

- **Drought extends and intensifies the wildfire season,** causing extensive damage to property and human health. In the 2024-25 drought, the number of wildfires in November (461) was 2x higher than the average worst month of the wildfire season.
- In 2022, the US Department of Agriculture designated nine counties in Massachusetts as **"natural disaster areas"** due to that year's drought.
- **River herring struggle in low stream flows**, sometimes resulting in fish kills. The herring help sustain important commercial & recreational species, such as cod, haddock, and striped bass.
- Cranberry bogs, an iconic Massachusetts crop that comprise approximately 25% of the nation's cranberry crop, are especially at risk of failure during drought.
- **In 2016, five municipalities declared water supply emergencies.**
- **In October 2020, many rivers around the state experienced record low flows.** The Three Mile River in Dighton had a 54-year low and the North Nashua River in Leominster had an 85-year low for the month of October, contributing to losses in tourism, recreation, and property value.
- **Droughts make it harder for crops to grow, impacting our local agriculture.** In 2016, Massachusetts farmers suffered an $18 million loss due to drought-related crop losses.

Why the Drought Bill is Important:

This bill would give the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs the authority to require regional water conservation measures during a declared drought, yielding bigger water savings when our rivers and water supplies need it most. The bill would only affect nonessential outdoor watering, as recommended in the state's 2023 Drought Management Plan. Water use for agriculture or business would be exempt. The bill would also make watering rules consistent and clearer for the public.

More uniform conservation measures would make outreach easier for municipalities. They would benefit from message reinforcement by neighboring towns. Cities and towns could use the outreach materials that the state creates during every drought declaration, instead of having to create their own.

Sucker Brook, Pepperell. November, 2024. Utkir Adkhamov

Cascade Brook, Worcester. November, 2024. Elsie Uffelman

The State's 2023 ResilientMass plan lists drought as a major climate threat likely to have a "high" consequence to the natural environment, humans, and our economy. The plan also cites a higher risk of wildfires, invasive species, and reduced health of native species. This is a climate risk that impacts every corner of Massachusetts.

Currently, the state lacks the authority to require water conservation during a drought, until the Governor declares a drought emergency. The way we experience droughts is changing, so our response should be too. Rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns are increasing the length, frequency, and intensity of droughts. A new type of drought requires a new, more coordinated approach to management.

This bill complements the state's push for housing. New development, new homes, new families all need water. While we can't create "new water," we can be better stewards of our existing supplies, ensuring that every resident of the Commonwealth has access to abundant clean water along with our agriculture and ecosystems.

This common-sense "drought bill" lets us save water during a drought, rather than waiting until an emergency strikes.

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