



The Environment Agency has declared official drought zones in a further 17 English counties and said the shortages could last until Christmas or beyond.

Environmental experts said dry weather over the past few months had left some rivers in England exceptionally low and had now extended the country's "drought map" into the Midlands and the South West.

Environment Agency officials stress that public water supplies are unlikely to be affected by the ongoing drought, but are reiterating calls from consumers to combat the dry conditions by using scarce water wisely.

Warning of the prospect of the current drought stretching into 2013, Trevor Bishop, head of water resources at the Environment Agency, said: "A longer term drought, lasting until Christmas and perhaps beyond, now looks more likely.

"While we've had some welcome rain recently, the problem has not gone away, and we would urge everyone - right across the country - to use water wisely now, which will help to prevent more serious impacts next year."

The Agency, which is liaising with businesses, farmers and water companies to meet the challenges of a continued drought, had already declared drought zones in London, the South East, East Anglia and parts of Yorkshire.

Exceptionally dry conditions across the major part of England are the result of a lack of rainfall over the past two winters, which has left rivers and ground waters depleted.

A spokesman for the Environment Agency said: "While public water supplies in these areas are

unlikely to be affected, the lack of rain is taking its toll on the environment and farmers - causing problems for wildlife, wetlands and crop production. The Environment Agency is urging businesses, water companies and consumers to all play their part by using water wisely, to help conserve precious water supplies."

Commenting on the news, Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman said: "As more areas of the UK move into drought it is vital that we use less water to protect the public's water supply in the driest areas of the country.

"It is for everyone to share the responsibility to save water. We are asking everyone to help by using less water and starting now."