

# Memorandum

**To:** Town Council  
**From:** Dylan King, Sustainability & Water Conservation Specialist  
**Date:** March 13, 2026  
**Re:** Drought Monitoring and Irrigation Restriction Considerations



This Memo is to provide an update regarding statewide drought and snowpack conditions and communicate what these conditions could mean for Erie as we head into the 2026 irrigation season.

## **Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)**

The Front Range of Colorado is an arid, high desert environment, yet landscape expectations are often in conflict with this reality. Currently, snowpack conditions are well below normal, elevating the likelihood of tighter water supply conditions later this year, coupled with an unusual winter drought. The good news is that Erie already has a Drought Plan and structured framework to allow us to respond appropriately.

Staff is beginning proactive communication and voluntary conservation if conditions remain dry. Specifically, we are moving towards a two-day address-based (odd/even) voluntary watering schedule, which we may ask to transition to mandatory if conditions do not improve.

We will continue monitoring conditions closely and will provide updated assessments as we move into spring and summer. Sharing the message about the two-day schedule **now** is important as irrigation timers are programmed for the upcoming season. Two days per week of irrigation is standard now in the Front Range.

## **The proposed schedule is:**

Even addresses: Monday and Thursday

Third day if needed: Saturday

- Spray Heads: 12-15 minutes per zone per day (three cycles)
- Rotors Heads: 25-35 minutes per zone per day (three cycles)
- Drip Zones: 40-60 minutes per zone (depends heavily on plant type and emitter spacing)

Odd addresses: Tuesday and Friday

Third day if needed: Sunday

- Spray Heads: 12-15 minutes per zone per day (three cycles)
- Rotors Heads: 25-35 minutes per zone per day (three cycles)
- Drip Zones: 40-60 minutes per zone (depends heavily on plant type and emitter spacing)

A third day may be added once the Town has transitioned to normal irrigation season operations and extended hot, dry conditions warrant additional watering. These conditions will be monitored by Town staff and communicated to Town water users through normal communication channels.

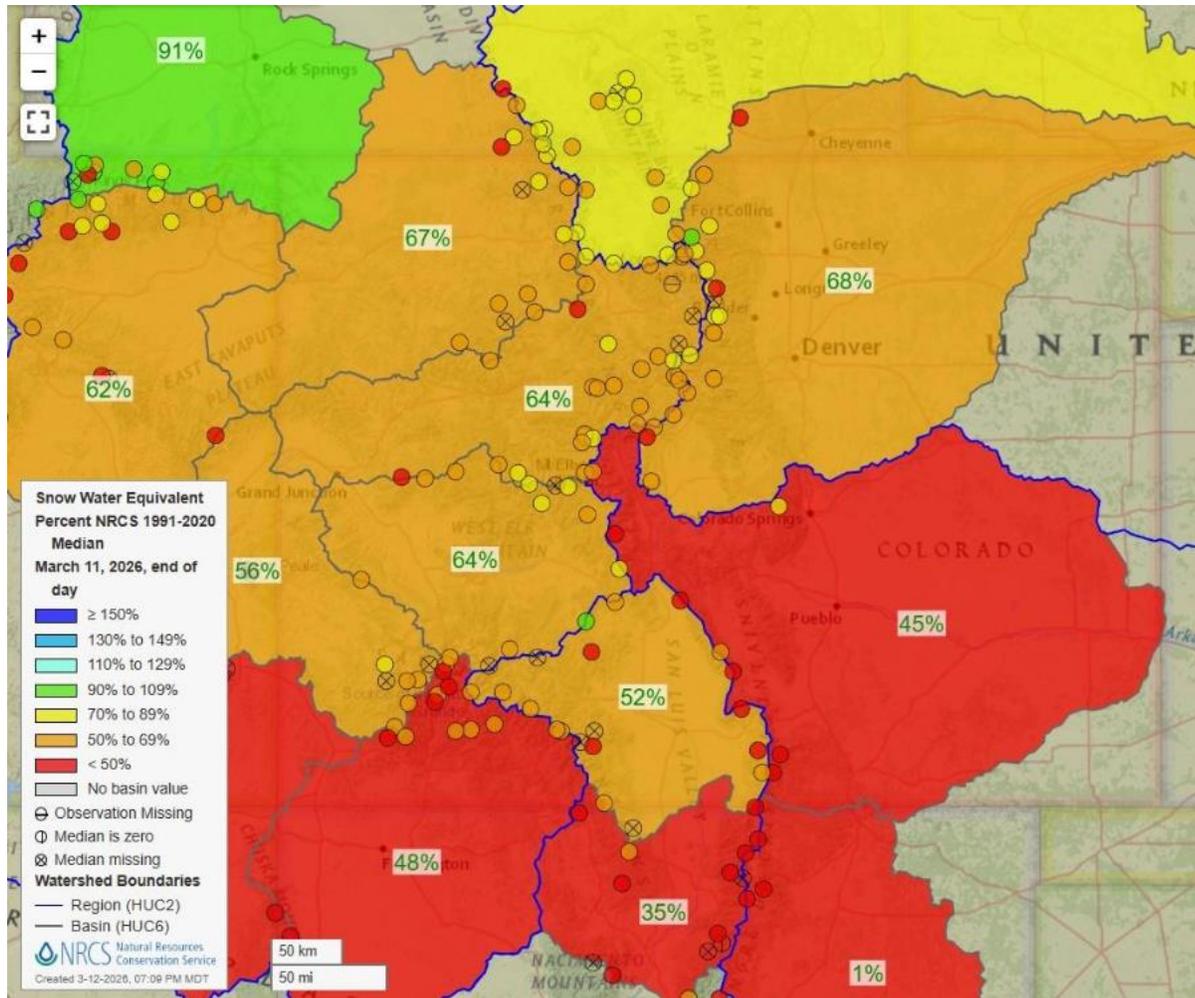
This memo is informational as we are not yet at a decision, but current conditions suggest that it's important that we prepare for potential early-season action consistent with our adopted [Drought & Water Supply Shortage Plan](#) and potentially beyond.

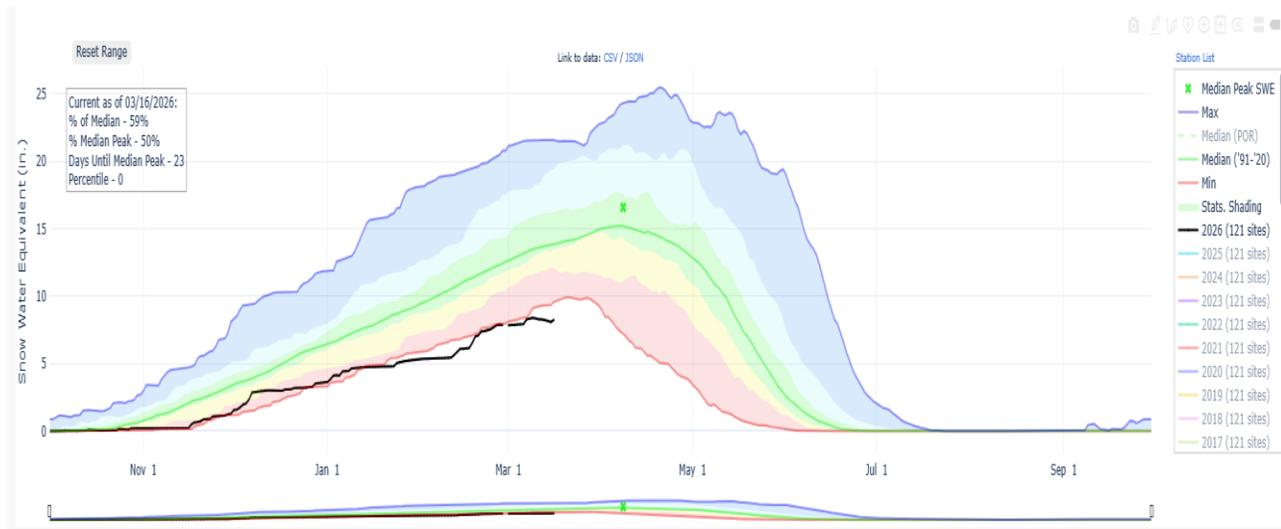
## Current Conditions as of mid-March :

### The Colorado snowpack is well below normal across much of Colorado.

Statewide snow water equivalent (SWE), or amount of water in the snow we receive, is tracking significantly below average for this time of year. In key basins that supply much of the Front Range we are seeing:

- Colorado River Basin SWE is well below the median (see graph below).
- This is where most of the Town's source water comes from.





*This graph courtesy of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service illustrates the Colorado Snow Water Equivalent*

There is still time to accumulate more snow this winter season, however it's important to note that Colorado would need a record setting March and April to recover to average conditions.

Reservoir storage statewide is not critically low today; however, snowpack is the primary driver of spring runoff and summer supply, with 80% of potable water in the Front Range provided by snowmelt. When the snowpack season begins this low, it increases the probability that runoff will be below normal. While reservoirs are in good shape now, we need to consider the potential for a multi-year drought event.

We are in what's commonly referred to as a "snow drought." That does not automatically mean severe shortages, but it does increase the risk of severe shortages heading into irrigation season. This year's snow drought can be attributed in part to the higher-than-normal temperatures we have seen for much of the winter.

### **What This Means for Erie and the Upcoming Irrigation Season:**

Erie's water rights portfolio is strong, and we have many systems and programs in place to help our users reduce their consumption. Erie's **Drought & Water Supply Shortage Plan** was designed specifically to handle variable conditions like this. That said, a few realities are worth highlighting:

1. **Low snowpack increases the chance of tighter regional water supplies later this year.** Even if Erie's water supply is sufficient, neighboring providers will likely (or have already) move into voluntary or mandatory stages. This could affect resident expectations and raise understandable concerns.
2. **Warm and dry Spring weather drives early irrigation demand.** If we see above-average temperatures continue in April and May, outdoor water use could ramp up quickly, getting ahead of non-irrigation source water supplies.
3. **Early conservation is far more effective than late restrictions.** Erie's Drought Plan is built around staged response and early communication intentionally. If we wait until July to react, the ability to meaningfully reduce peak demand is limited. Once irrigation timers are set, it's more difficult to undo.

## **Erie's Drought Plan Framework:**

Erie's adopted Plan uses a **Shortage Index** (supply relative to demand) to determine appropriate drought stages:

- **Stage 1 (Voluntary):** ~10% total reduction target
- **Stage 2 (Watch):** 10–20% total reduction
- **Stage 3 (Severe):** 20–45% total reduction, mandatory measures
- **Stage 4 (Emergency):** >45% reduction, potential prohibitions

We are not currently declaring a stage and resulting implications, but given current snowpack conditions, we need to be prepared for the possibility of at least **Stage 1 (voluntary) declaration** if March remains dry with establishing this declaration as early as possible important. We are also constructing a strong outreach campaign to encourage early conservation measures from our users. This includes detailing a two-day per week watering schedule (with an optional and defined third day if temperature and precipitation meet a pre-determined threshold, increased conservation program participation, and a robust education effort.

### **What are our Neighbors Doing?**

Several Front Range water providers are already publicly discussing drought conditions and potential measures. Some are indicating voluntary reductions are likely if the snowpack does not recover. For example, Broomfield has officially placed the [community under a drought watch](#). This is a precautionary alert signaling to residents that restrictions may increase later in the season if dry conditions continue.

Regional messaging influences how residents interpret our own actions. If multiple neighboring jurisdictions move into voluntary stages, Erie's position will be questioned. Erie staff meet monthly with the Front Range Drought Coordination Group led by Northern Water. We will continue to lean on this group to stay alert to the actions and concerns of our neighbors.

### **What is the Town doing at its own properties?**

We are reducing irrigation at parks and Town facilities of non-functional turf and focusing on maintaining areas of recreation, in line with the Drought Plan. Facilities are important to the community as they offer recreational opportunities for all residents in a drought, unlike individual properties.

The Town also operates a re-use water system, taking treated wastewater effluent and delivering it to various developments for use in common area irrigation. These developments include Colliers Hill, Erie Highlands, and Westerly. Erie Commons and Erie Community Park also are irrigated with re-use and raw water which does not require extensive filtration and processing. The Town is continuously investing in, and expanding, its raw water and re-use water supplies.

### **What is the golf course doing to reduce demand on the water supply?**

Colorado National Golf Course (CNGC), and most common area irrigation in Vista Ridge utilize raw water from ditches and Coal Creek. Columbine Mine Park is irrigated with this same supply.

### **Town Programming**

The Town offers many water conservation and efficiency programs that are available to all users. These include:

- [Water Efficiency Rebates](#)
- [Slow the Flow Sprinkler Consultations](#)
- [Garden In A Box garden kits](#)
- [Turf Replacement Rebate Program](#)