

Vatican switches off fountains as Italy battles drought

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The Vatican turns off fountains as Italy struggles with a drought

The historic fountains in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican lay empty Tuesday after the tiny city state turned them off as Italy struggles with a prolonged draught.

The dry basins of the two fountains by 17th-century sculptors Carlo Maderno and Gian Lorenzo Bernini were symbolic of a period of

sweltering temperatures which have devastated farms and forced Rome to consider [water](#) rationing.

Ten regions across the country have called for a state of emergency to be declared after Italy suffered the second-driest spring in 60 years and rainfall in the first six months of the year was down 33 percent.

The dry spell has deprived Italy of 20 billion cubic metres of water so far this year—the equivalent of Lake Como.

And there is little hope for those anxiously watching the skies in the capital: the national meteorological service has predicted small showers in the coming days but not enough to relieve the pressure.

Some 300 of the city's famous "big nose" public fountains—so called because of their shape—have already been turned off and more will follow.

The Lazio region is considering rationing water in Rome from Saturday for 1.5 million inhabitants for up to eight hours a day—though the proposal is being fiercely challenged by the city's anti-establishment mayor.

The rationing threat follows the decision to stop withdrawing water from Lake Bracciano near Rome because it had dropped to such a low level that it risked sparking an environmental disaster.

Acea, the utility firm which runs Rome's water system, has slammed the stop on using water from the lake as "unnecessary" and said the move left it no choice but to cut off supplies to residents.

'Rome water network leaking'

Farmers from the southern island of Sicily to the country's northern plains are also raising the alarm.

The Po river, on which 35 percent of the nation's agricultural production depends, lies 50 centimetres (20 inches) lower than the same period last year, according to Coldiretti, Italy's agricultural union.

The union estimated that losses suffered by farmers and live-stock owners would exceed two billion euros (\$2.3 billion), with production of crops from cereals to olives and tomatoes hit in two-thirds of the country.

Geologist Mario Tozzi told AFP that fountains were not the problem, the real issue was wasted water.

"The water network in Rome is leaking, almost 40 litres out of 100 are lost," he said, adding that the cost of repairing damaged pipelines across Italy was estimated at about 60 billion euros.

He also pointed the finger at the low price of water: "Farmers pay so little that they don't bother to put in place a system that would allow them to save water, it makes more sense for them to waste it," he said.

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