

Hemlock Decks & Porches Details Drought Effects on Deck Footings

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Massachusetts environmental officials announced on August 7 that several regions remain in Level 2 Significant Drought despite above-average July rainfall, and Hemlock Decks & Porches has issued guidance on what delayed groundwater recovery means for deck foundations.

Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Rebecca Tepper declared that the Western Region and Dukes County had returned to normal conditions following improved summer precipitation. The Central and Northeast Regions remained at Level 2, alongside the Connecticut River Valley, Cape Cod and Nantucket County. According to the state announcement, Massachusetts received between 4.5 and nearly 9.5 inches of rain during July, more than is typical for the month.

The state attributed the persistence of drought conditions to the pace of groundwater recovery. Rainfall replenishes rivers, streams and surface soil relatively quickly, while groundwater recovers more slowly. The Drought Management Task Force is scheduled to meet again on August 20 to assess whether recent rainfall produces lasting improvement.

That distinction carries structural consequences for outdoor construction. Heavy rainfall saturates the upper soil column within days, while the deeper zone where deck footings bear can remain drier for weeks or months afterward. The result is a soil profile holding markedly different moisture content at different depths beneath the same structure.

Fine-grained soils respond to changing moisture content by changing volume. Soil that has lost moisture over an extended dry period contracts and can pull away from the surfaces it contacts, including the sides of concrete footings and pier shafts. That contraction reduces the lateral support and skin friction the surrounding ground originally provided. When moisture returns to those soils, they expand again, and the structure above experiences a second adjustment.

Neither the contraction nor the expansion occurs uniformly across a building site. Footings on the shaded side of a structure, near downspout discharge, or within the root zone of mature trees can sit in soil at a measurably different moisture content than footings a short distance away. Variable soil composition, common across glaciated New England terrain, adds further inconsistency.

Uneven vertical movement between footings supporting a single structure is what produces visible problems. Above grade, differential settlement appears as a deck surface that no longer reads level, railing posts leaning out of plumb, gaps at the ledger connection where the structure meets the house, and stair stringers separating from the platform. These symptoms develop gradually rather than at once, which is part of why the cause is often misattributed to workmanship or materials.

"The rain gets attention because people can see it, but the soil around a footing four feet down is on a slower schedule," said Teddy Labonte, Owner of Hemlock Decks & Porches. "What we look at during a site assessment is how a particular yard actually drains and where the moisture goes, because two footings on the same deck can sit in completely different conditions depending on shade, grade and what is growing nearby."

Foundation approach is determined by site conditions rather than by a general preference. Hemlock Decks & Porches installs both helical piers and traditional concrete footings, with the selection depending on the soil profile, the structural loads involved, and the depth at which suitable bearing material is present. The performance of either system depends on design and installation relative to the specific site, which is why the company conducts a site assessment covering drainage, access and soil conditions before design work begins.

Framing material also influences how a completed structure responds to foundation movement. Hemlock Decks & Porches frames with wood, steel, aluminum and pressure-treated laminated veneer lumber depending on span, load and exposure, and the relationship between the foundation and the framing above it determines how movement at one bearing point carries through the rest of the structure.

For existing decks, seasonal observation provides useful information. A structure that has stood through several wet and dry cycles without visible change is generally performing as designed, while one showing progressive change across successive seasons warrants closer examination of the framing and foundation.

"Most of what we see in older decks traces back to what was under them rather than what was on top," Labonte said. "A board can be replaced. A footing that was never taken to competent bearing is a different conversation, and it is worth having before the surface is renewed."

Homeowners who have observed changes in an existing structure can have the framing and foundation evaluated. Hemlock Decks & Porches provides deck repair, resurfacing and full replacement where foundation movement has affected the structure.

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Hemlock Contracting of Woburn

Hemlock Contracting is a premier deck builder in Woburn, delivering high-quality, custom decks designed for durability, style, and long-term performance.

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