

Drought conditions spreading across Texas

BY BILL HANNA

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Lake Weatherford's level is dropping, and water from Benbrook Lake is being pumped in. S-T/Paul Moseley



As if the economy weren't bad enough, it appears that Texas will have to deal with a growing drought this year.

The latest U.S. drought monitor came out Thursday, and it shows the debilitating dry conditions slowly spreading across the state.

Locally, Tarrant and Dallas counties remain in a moderate drought, but areas west of Fort Worth are classified as severe.

Texas will face more agricultural losses, a growing wildfire risk and possibly water restrictions this summer if the drought persists. And the exceptional drought that has gripped Austin, San Antonio and Corpus Christi appears to be spreading closer to North Texas.

"It's migrating this way," said meteorologist Joe Harris of the National Weather Service. "We could move to the next stage next month if we don't get significant rainfall."

But the prospects don't look good.

Seventy-four percent of the state is in a moderate drought or worse, and the entire state is considered abnormally dry. For South Central Texas, from Austin to San Antonio and Corpus Christi, conditions are worse than they were in the 1950s, considered by many to be the drought of record for Texas.

"Right now, the conditions in that part of the state are only rivaled by the drought of 1917 and 1918," said state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon.

"For that South Central region, it is the driest September to February on record," Nielsen-Gammon said.

Dry outlook

The 90-day long-range forecasts are predicting above-normal temperatures and below-normal precipitation for all of Texas.

"There's really nothing to hang your hat on for spring and summer; it's cross-your-fingers time," Nielsen-Gammon said. "By next fall, the long-range forecasts indicate an El Niño, which would bring a wet weather pattern to Texas. That provides some hope that the dry pattern would stop after this summer."

The most immediate concern will be wildfires.

Conditions are now similar to 2005-06, when a record wildfire season scorched 2.25 million acres across Texas.

"The potential right now for a large fire is very, very high," said Darrell Schulte, a fire behavioral analyst for the Texas Forest Service. "The activity rates, the rates of spread are very, very rapid because of the drought. You get the right conditions, strong winds and low humidity, and a wildfire could really take off."

Schulte said extreme fire conditions extend from the Dallas-Fort Worth area toward Austin, San Antonio, the Hill Country and into parts of West Texas.

For Texas farmers, the planting season is just starting, but there's not enough moisture in many parts of the state.

"Right now, South Central Texas is in the heart of planting season, and that area has not seen any drought relief at all," Nielsen-Gammon said. "There is no way to even get crops started in many areas. We've seen several droughts in the last 10 to 15 years that have cost several billion dollars in agricultural losses in terms of lost income. We could very well be in that neighborhood again."

Higher water bills

In Weatherford, customers are facing increased water bills as the city is forced to pump water from Benbrook Lake into the already-low Lake Weatherford.

It could be a preview of what many will see this summer if lake levels drop.

If the drought persists, the Tarrant Regional Water District could implement Stage 1 watering restrictions by late summer, which limits outdoor watering to two days a week and prohibits outdoor watering of paved surfaces, such as sidewalks. If cities don't already have 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. watering restrictions, they will ask municipalities to impose those rules.

There's a chance of rain Saturday night, Sunday and Monday. But forecasters don't expect enough to put a dent in the drought or wildfire conditions.

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