

# Look at worst drought in 50 years

(The worst drought in 50 years hit the nation's midsection in July and August. Drought damage was severe enough to change the outlook for U.S. agriculture — impacting on farm supplies, prices, and incomes. It may take several years before the full effects of the drought run their course. In the following article, USDA's economist Don Seaborg of the Economic Research Service, describes the legacy of a summer many farmers would rather forget.)

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Farmers started the season confidently. Generous rains had left good soil moisture in most major crop areas of the country. Spring seeding ran about two weeks late because fields were simply too soggy for planting. In early June, one assessment indicated that subsoil moisture reserves would, at least partially, offset any normal dryness during the growing season.

At the same time, economists were forecasting record yields. The reasons: nearly ideal moisture conditions and reduced crop production on marginal lands because of acreage limitation programs. Super high yields, they calculated, would offset a large part of the acreage cut. However, the situation changed about midseason. Rising temperatures and cloudless skies scorched young plants as they entered the reproductive stage of development.

The amount of moisture needed for major field crops, such as corn and soybeans, peaks from the time the crops flower until the ears or pods are fully formed. Just when the plants needed moisture the most, the topsoil dried up. High

temperatures increased evaporation. A major problem: shallow roots. Plants had not put down deep roots early in the growing season because topsoil moisture was so abundant, consequently, they were more susceptible to heat-stress.

### Yields decline

By early August, the drought had taken its toll. Corn yields were estimated at 100 bushels per acre, down from 1982's record of 115 bushels, and substantially less than predicted in early July. Soybean yields were expected to fall about 2½ bushels below 1982's 32.2 bushels per acre. The situation got worse with the Corn Belt receiving only about half the expected rain in August. By early September, continued drought had further lowered corn and soybean yield estimates to 85 and 25 bushels per acre, respectively. All major field crops suffered yield losses this year, expect winter wheat which was planted in the fall of 1982 and harvested as the weather began to turn dry.

The 1983 drought was particularly devastating because it was centered in the most productive areas. In the 1974 and 1980 droughts, areas most severely affected were largely outside the Corn Belt and both droughts were shorter, and August rains helped improve yield prospects. This year, rains didn't come until early September — definitely too late for corn and probably too late for the soybean crop. Unless rains are very generous this fall and winter, subsoil reserves will be low, and 1984 crops will require frequent moisture during the growing season.

Hot summer weather also slows the rates of weight gain for

livestock and poultry. In some cases of exceptionally high heat, animals die. Widespread broiler losses in the Southeast in late August resulted from the heat. Of course, any electrical outage that stops fans in farrowing or poultry houses can be disastrous in unusually hot weather. The liveweight of slaughtered cattle and hogs declined this summer, reflecting heat stress.

Pasture and ranges were generally adequate and there was no early or large forced movement of cattle to slaughter. Good

moisture in western ranges this summer and adequate forage supplies in the Corn Belt and Southeast helped livestock through the grazing season. Recent rains are reviving pastures and filling stock ponds, brightening the picture for the fall and winter.

### Drought Changes Outlook

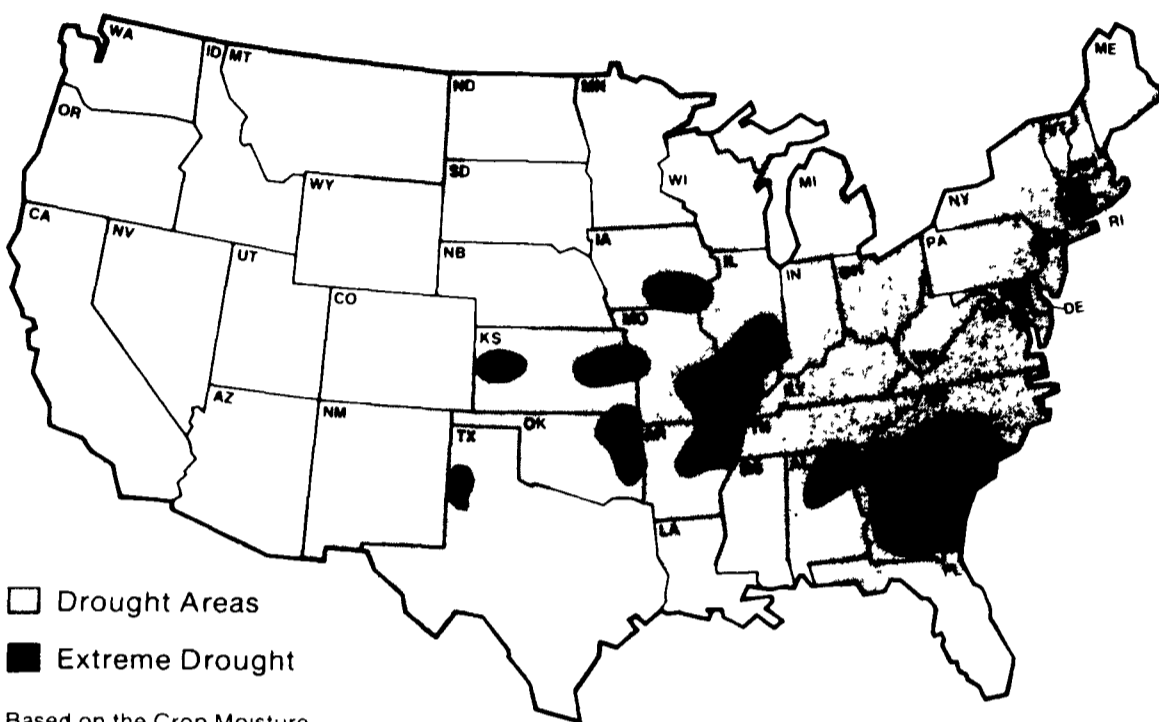
Crop production is expected to decline 26 percent this year, based on USDA September crop report. Probably about half of this decline reflects the impact of the hot, dry summer. Planned acreage cut-

backs account for the remainder, although production cuts were not uniform among crops. Winter wheat and barley production rose slightly, while output of corn, sorghum, spring wheat, soybeans, and cotton will probably fall a third to one-half below 1982's production.

Farm market prices have risen as crop prospects declined, but increases have been tempered by huge stocks of food grains, feed grains, oilseeds, and cotton carried over from earlier years when yields were high. Large carry-over

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## The Drought of 1983 Strikes the Heart of the Corn Belt

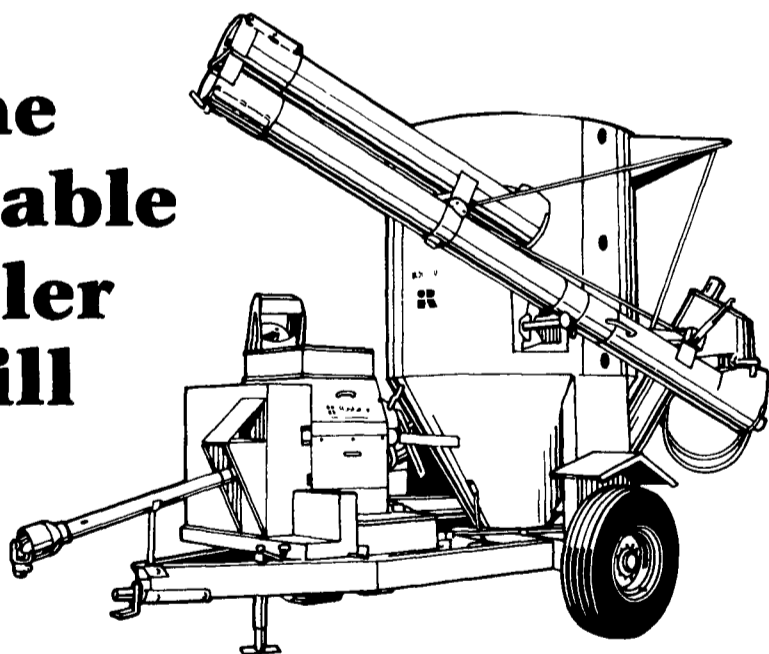


□ Drought Areas  
■ Extreme Drought

Based on the Crop Moisture Index as of Aug 20 1983

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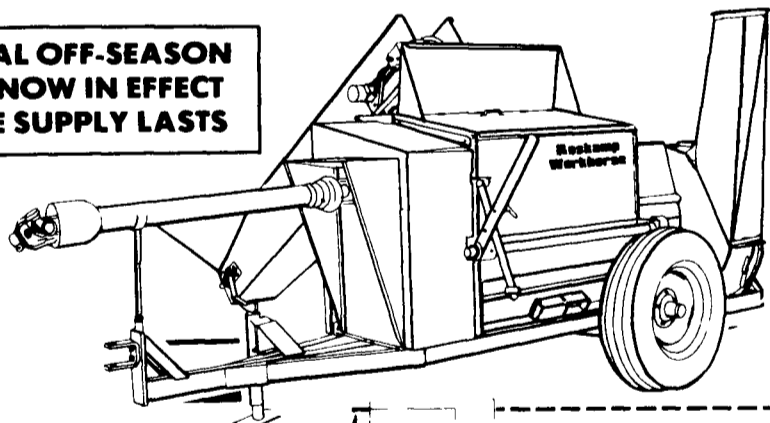
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