

Dry Weather Reaches Critical Stage

UNIVERSITY PARK — Dry weather has been plaguing the southern states and the southeastern portion of the state for the past three months. Unless relief from the current moisture stress is imminent, within the week, serious crop loss is inevitable.

"Up to this point most areas have had adequate moisture to keep the corn growing. From here on out, as the corn enters the tassel and silk stage, we need a half inch per week to get a near normal crop," Dr. Joseph McGahen, associate professor of agronomy extension explained.

Although precipitation is forecasted for the weekend, it may be too late for some portions of the area.

Franklin County Extension Agent John Shearer reported in some portions of his county 15 to 20 percent of the crop will not develop any ears. However, some portions of Franklin County, mainly the southeast corner, still have the potential to produce 100 bushel yields.

Reports of wet portions of a drought stressed county are not uncommon. The question, How dry is it, is often answered, "It depends on soil type and topography."

In Pennsylvania, the northern tier counties are the wettest with up to nine inches above normal rainfall, according to the National Weather Service in Harrisburg. This is not a blessing as excessive rainfall in Erie has caused serious vegetable crop losses.

From the northern, northwest and west counties, the dry weather increased in severity to a line which can be drawn from Allentown to Harrisburg to east of Pittsburgh.

Paul Knight, Penn State meteorologist, reports that the driest spot in the state has been Blairsville, in lower Indiana County, where they have a moisture deficit of 5.5 inches since April 1, or 35 percent below normal rainfall. Harrisburg has a deficit of 2.5 inches, while northern Lancaster County is near normal for the same period.

"The state has a mottled look," Knight noted in explaining where the dry areas are.

"Fulton, Adams, Franklin, York and Southern Lancaster Counties have large moisture deficits," he added. In classifying the dry conditions, Knight suggested these counties are in a moderate drought severity with the southern portion receiving an extreme drought severity classification.

Below the Mason-Dixon Line the dry weather intensifies and is in an extreme drought severity. The severity of the drought increases in the deep south.

Portions of Georgia and Alabama are experiencing a precipitation deficit of 20 inches for the first half of the year. The normal rainfall in those states is only 60 inches per year, Knight said.

These states had a dry winter, an exceptionally dry spring, and a dry start to the summer. There is serious crop loss in the south and it is unlikely that rainfall now will help the crops much, he added.

"What they need...is a tropical disturbance that is rich in moisture to come in and sit over top of them for awhile," Knight commented.

Carroll County, Maryland, is critical, according to David Green, extension agent. Some farmers in that area are terming this drought the worst they have experienced.

Corn in the Carroll County area is tasseling at waist height, some corn and soybeans have failed to germinate. Corn yields are predicted at 75 bushels per acre, down from the normal 110 bushels, Green said.

He added that there is no pasture to speak of, forcing beef producers to feeding winter hay now. Also, areas north and south of I-70 are "desolate."

An encouraging note was a "bumper barley crop and a good wheat crop," he noted. However, the alfalfa and clover hay crops were diminished by 1/3 to 2/3 for first cutting, second cutting was termed a semi-disaster, and without rain third cutting will be a total loss, Green said.

Franklin County also experienced a significant loss in alfalfa crops as well as wheat and barley yields, Shearer reported. "Some areas of the county had as high as a 50 percent crop in both first and second cuttings."

While the county has experience everything from ideal to poor cuttings, some producers need a good third cutting to meet their winter forage needs, Shearer said.

He noted that this dry weather is more severe at this point that the most recent drought was at the same point. The drought actually started in March, "however, we didn't recognize it at the time," Shearer said.

"Everyone thought it was great that they could get in the fields in March. They forgot the moisture level was not where it should be. This permitted the soil to warm early and early planting," he added.

John Yocum of the Penn State Research Farm in Landisville, reported a rainfall in March that



Corn and late soybeans have failed to germinate in some areas of Pennsylvania. The drought severity increases in Maryland, Virginia and Georgia where the moisture deficit is as high as 20 inches.

was 1.3 inches below normal. April was .41 inches above normal, but May was 2.13 inches below normal and June was .25 inches below normal.

In spite of the rainfall for the main growing months being 69 percent of normal, Yocum notes that only the surface water has been effected. "The water table is okay since it received a good recharging in November of last year," he continued. Presently the situation is not as severe as it was three years ago, he explained, but if the dry weather continues it could be.

Contributing to the depletion of surface moisture has been the recent above normal temperatures and sunny skies, Knight said.

The windflow pattern at the mid-level height of 10,000 feet has influenced the weather, Knight said.

For the past few months, the wind has been out of the west and northwest regions which is a dry flow. In the northwest area there is no great moisture source other than the great lakes. While this has kept Erie wet, by the time the wind reaches the south central portion of the state it is dry, he explained.

Southeastern states are being kept dry by a Bermuda High. The effect of the dry weather is taking its toll on agriculture in these states.

USA Today reports that 10 percent of Georgia's flocks may die; half of Virginia's corn crop may be lost; 90 percent of Alabama's \$50 million wheat crop has been lost; 20 of Maryland's 23 farm counties may be declared disaster areas; and the peanut, cotton, peach and apple crops of Alabama and West Virginia are threatened.

Although it is little, Pennsylvania can take comfort in the knowledge that crops losses here are still mostly speculative. The next two weeks will fill in the question marks of how extensive the losses will be.

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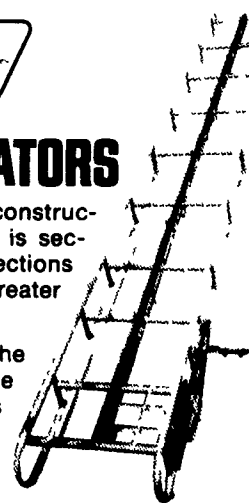
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