

# Possible Drought

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normal for the year.) Singel said some counties are about six inches below normal.

According to Peter Ahnert, meteorologist in charge at the Harrisburg office of the National Weather Service, "The long term Palmer Index — a drought index — indicates a moderate drought over basically all of Pennsylvania.

"On the short term, the crop moisture index — an index that shows the crop need verses available water — is a 'minus one' in the lower Susquehanna Valley, and that's the worst area. A 'minus one' means abnormally dry and prospects deteriorating," Ahnert said.

"As far as the forecast goes, here in the lower Susquehanna Valley, the next chance of rain is a 30 percent chance of a shower or thunderstorm on Saturday (today). But again, that's going to be probably scattered . . . we might not get any rain at all," he said.

Through the weekend, Ahnert said chances for precipitation were not good as well as slight for the rest of the week.

Statewide, with all the dryness, most crops are stressed; particularly corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and tobacco.

The vegetable crops, including snap beans, have been brought to a virtual halt in many places for the lack of rain.

Early this week, a cold front remained stationary through the Southeast through the Mid-Atlantic states, dumping some excessive rain amounts along the coastline and in the southeast states.

But agriculture areas in Pennsylvania and surrounding states, including Maryland, Ohio, West Virginia, and New York, only received a sprinkling at best. Areas in northern Lancaster Co. received about 2/10 of an inch. Other areas in Lancaster received about 1 inch.

And this is when the crops need moisture the most.

"All we can hope for is for a few showers to tide us through until a front stays around and it rains for at least a couple of days," said John Yocum of the Penn State southeast research laboratory in Landisville.

Yocum said that corn, alfalfa, and particularly soybean farmers are concerned that not enough rain

will cause yield losses. In corn, expected yields, if the drought persists, could total 10 to 20 percent.

If a drought occurs later on, such as it did in 1988 during tassling and pollination of corn, huge losses can occur.

"If we don't get substantial rain within two weeks," Yocum said, "corn stands will be in big trouble."

The rain early in the week was widely scattered and variable — some areas, such as southern Lancaster Co., received up to 2 inches. Eastern Lancaster Co., around New Holland, said Yocum, received up to about an inch.

But according to Mel Brown, Centre Co. agent, farmers will need about 1 inch of water a week to obtain a good stand for any of their crops.

"The farmers who got the first alfalfa cutting early in May got a good cutting," Brown said. But he is recommending to farmers to wait, during the drought conditions, until blossom in order for the plant to build up enough root energy for further cutting.

According to Yocum, alfalfa hay losses have amounted so far to about 1 ton per acre. But the hay crop, if the drought persists, will not dry, it just will not produce enough for a cutting.

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And for farmers who haven't planted the soybeans yet, extension agents are asking that farmers avoid planting until substantial rain arrives.

Those who transplanted tobacco late are also seeing their crops wither and die.

For vegetable farmers, most plants, because of their shallow root systems, are under stress, said Yocum. Snap beans cannot root without enough water. The production crops, including corn, can establish themselves under stress because of their deep root systems.

But so can some weeds, according to Brown. "Farmers put on herbicides after an appreciable rainfall," he said. But many of the herbicides have not had time, using moisture, to attack weeds and are still active on the soil.

If a substantial rainfall doesn't come, then "timely showers" will at least hold off a potential drought, said Paul Craig, Dauphin Co. agent.

"Overall, the upper part of the county, the Lykens Valley, is OK," he said. "Armstrong Valley looks OK. Dauphin Co. is in good shape up to this point."

Those who planted early, according to Craig, were spared the effects of a drought. "Timeli-

ness was critical and people who delayed planting, they suffered," he said.

Craig said that the crops need about 1 inch of rain every week to sustain production. But he predicts a 10-15 percent yield reduction in corn.

In York Co., most areas need 5 inches of rain or more to make up the lack of rain.

According to John Rowehl, York extension agent, farmers who want to sidedress nitrogen on the corn should use a dribble application rather than broadcast — if they believe they have to.

Because of the drought, the sidedressing will do little to counteract the already expected 15-20 percent drop in yield potential.

"We really don't know what to say to them that I will be confident will be right because of the lack of rain," said Rowehl.

The northern section of the county received little relief from the rain the past week. Lewisburg, for instance, recorded only about 1/10 of an inch of rain. Western York received about the same amount and only the southern sections "got a little reprieve," said Rowehl.

This year, at planting, conditions were dry for corn, which has little effect on the standability. But in 1988, the drought came later, at the silking and pollinating stages (when the crop needs it the most) and created a 20 to 30 percent yield loss.

Extension agents are recommending that farmers, if they want to help their corn during the drought, cultivate lightly (about 1 inch) to loosen up the soil, help the drier soil act as a mulch, and provide better root aeration. But farmers should be careful not to prune the corn roots.

Other than that, farmers must be patient and hope that rain comes.

"It's on everybody's mind," said Craig. "What we need more than anything is for a two- to three-day front to get here and stay."

There apparently is no area in the state that has been spared some setback in crop production because of the unusual weather.

In Bradford County, with the second highest number of dairy farms in the state, behind Lancaster, the scenario is repeated.

Al Homan, extension agent in Bradford, said Thursday evening that, "Depending on what crops you're looking at, we have a variety of conditions."

He said that, in general, corn planted prior to May 15 has been looking good, until this past week when signs of drought stress began appearing. Corn planted after May 15 hasn't fared as well. He said he saw similar conditions near Bloomsburg about two weeks prior.

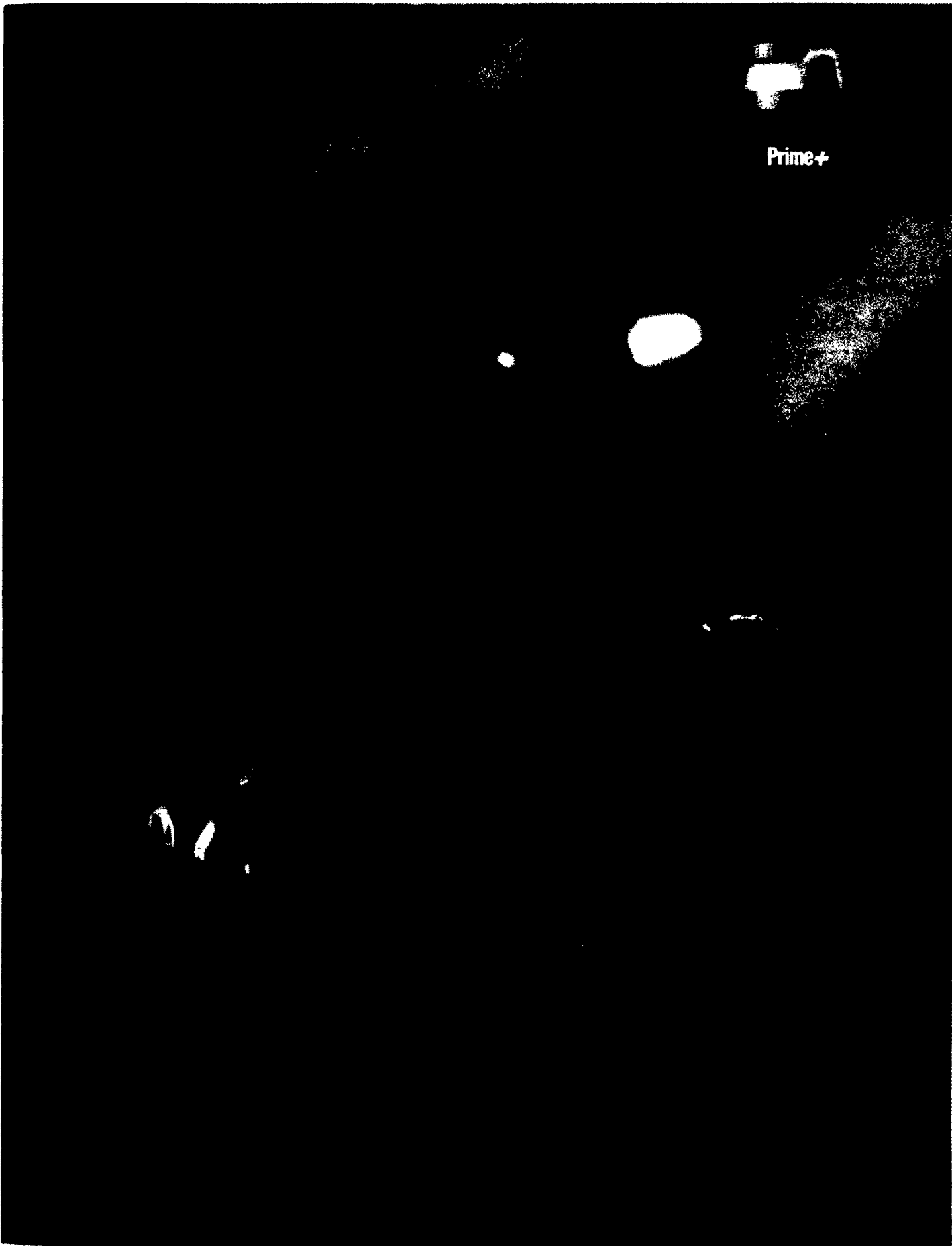
"The plant populations are quite low in some fields. The first crop of hay looks good, but the second growth on established hay fields looks very bad. It's not making much regrowth," he said.

Also, first year fields aren't getting too far. "Hay crops planted this spring got off to a good start and made 9 to 12 inches, but now has just stopped growing."

"The oat crop and other forage crops are almost a total loss. It's very poor this spring, because temperatures were quite high early in the year."

He said a few farmers have resorted to irrigation for the first time. Some are watering orchards, others are trying to get water to their hay or corn.

In the south western part of the



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