Parts Of Texas Slip Back Into Severe Drought

RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI,Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A dry fall that is on track to making the record books has sent portions of Texas, including Houston and Fort Worth, back into severe drought, raising concerns about wildfires and the health of wheat crops and tree farms, climatologists said Thursday.

September and November could be the driest of those months since 1950 and among the top five driest on record, State Climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon said. And not much more rain is expected this winter or spring since the El Nino pattern meteorologists had counted on for some moisture fizzled out almost before it began.

El Nino is characterized by unusually warm temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. La Nina comes from unusually cool temperatures there. El Nino usually brings rain to Texas and dryer conditions to the North. La Nina typically does the opposite.

While Texas had largely been spared by the devastating drought that has parched much of the Midwest and areas in the South, it never fully recovered from the historic dry spell in 2011 that forced ranchers to sell off their cattle, made hay prices skyrocket, turned reservoirs into muddy puddles and prevented rice farmers in South Texas from getting enough water to irrigate their fields. Now, the lack of rain again puts the state in a perilous situation.

"Normally, by this time in most of the state, the ground is taking up a lot of moisture and the temperatures are cool enough for the ground to stay moist for most of the winter," Nielsen-Gammon said. "But in a lot of parts of the state, it simply hasn't rained much in the past couple of months, so things are as dry as they are during the summer."

As a result, reservoirs are not refilling, and some are even dropping, which is unusual for winter in Texas, Nielsen-Gammon added.

The lingering impacts of 2011, when Texas endured the worst one-year drought in state history, are part of the problem, said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist at the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

"We climbed up on the fence but we never really got off the fence," he said of the drought. "It's a very fast tumble off of recovery back into the depths of drought."

All it took was a couple of months of below average rainfall for the U.S. Drought Monitor map Svoboda helps put together each week to begin registering significant problems for a state that is the nation's No. 1 cattle producer and a significant agricultural machine.

The latest map released Thursday, shows nearly 55 percent of Texas in severe drought, up from just over 40 percent last week. A severe drought is the third of five stages of drought reported by the Drought Monitor.

About 24.5 percent of Texas, including Houston and Fort Worth, is now in an extreme drought, the fourth stage, up from 23 percent last week. Overall, more than 80 percent of the state is in some form of drought, a 5 percent increase from a week ago.

"We keep waiting for a decent rainstorm to appear in the forecast, but it doesn't look like there's any in the next week," Nielsen-Gammon, the state climatologist, said.

Food prices are going to be impacted by the drought in Texas as it combines with the problems caused by the widespread dry spell plaguing the Midwest, Central Plains and the South, Svoboda added. Beef prices could rise to $6.75 a pound by next month, and the price of hay — crucial forage for the cattle industry — is skyrocketing. Concern among Texas planners that water may be a problem in 2013 is also justified, he said.

Denise Gutzmer, a drought impact specialist at the National Drought Mitigation Center, said winter wheat crops are suffering in Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska, and outright dying in parts of the Texas Panhandle. And ranchers in Texas who started restocking their cattle herds after getting some spring and summer rains are rethinking that move.

"Now they're looking out the windows and their pastures are brown and they're starting to destock again," Gutzmer said.

As the drought spreads through Texas, and continues across other parts of the United States, it feeds on itself and recovery becomes more difficult and distant, Svoboda added. There is no rain, and the soil is so dry, moisture doesn't rise from it, further hindering cloud formation.

"This drought is so large and so intense the spatial footprint of it won't change markedly between now and February," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/17/2014 - 3:49pm*):
http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2012/12/parts-texas-slip-back-severe-drought