

Drought Continues to Impact Oklahoma Agriculture
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Despite a forecast of rain for this weekend, the outlook remains bleak for much of Oklahoma's farming and ranching community. An ongoing drought, with origins beginning during June 2001, continues to worsen across northern and western Oklahoma. The U. S. Drought Monitor, a drought assessment released weekly by several federal agencies, including the Climate Prediction Center and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, has categorized the drought in northwestern Oklahoma as "severe". The Drought Monitor lists possible impacts of a severe drought as the following: crop or pasture losses likely, wildfire risks very high, and water shortages common.

Oklahoma Mesonet rainfall statistics reveal the severity of the drought. "Across the northern and western parts of the state, precipitation totals are around 50% below normal since June 1st of last year, with north-central Oklahoma being 12.24 inches below their normal rainfall total for that period," reports Gary McManus, a climatologist with the Oklahoma Climatological Survey. Rainfall totals for west-central and southwestern Oklahoma are 11.67 and 11.08 inches below normal, respectively. Statewide totals are not quite as bleak, however, being only 74% of normal for the same period, amounting to a 7.53-inch precipitation deficit. "Basically, the only part of the state not suffering is the southeastern third, where they are actually above normal. Northern and western Oklahoma are bearing the brunt of the drought effects," McManus said.

These precipitation deficits have begun to take their toll on Oklahoma wheat producers. Loss adjustors in Dewey, Harper, and Jackson counties have begun to release some acres of winter wheat for payments, and the losses are expected to multiply as the growing

season continues. Ben Marx, manager of Wheeler Brother's Grain Company in Seiling, reports that some local wheat fields already have been tilled in preparation for other crops. "I would say that about 10% of our wheat acreage around Seiling has been 'disasterized out'", Marx said, indicating the amount of the local wheat crop deemed a total loss by insurance adjustors. Gary Strickland, the Jackson County OSU Extension Director, reported that the wheat crop around Altus experienced a good spurt of growth from near-normal March rainfall. "However, the drought has harshly impacted Jackson County. If we get the rain that is forecast for this weekend, it sure will help a lot."

Conditions in far northwestern Oklahoma are catastrophic. "We're looking at about a 15-20% yield this year from our wheat crop. It's as bad as I've ever seen it," explained Sid Herd, manager of Farmer's Cooperative Association of Buffalo. "South of Buffalo, there's basically nothing left. We've probably sprayed three fields for bugs. The rest is just gone. If we don't get a good inch of rain in the next 7-10 days, that 20% yield estimate will look generous."

Fifty-five percent of the winter wheat crop in Oklahoma is rated poor or very poor by the Oklahoma Agricultural Statistics Service. This rating is down from 48% for the previous week. Only 17% of Oklahoma's winter wheat crop is rated as good or excellent.

Cattle producers statewide are being hit hard as well, with 58% of pasture and range conditions being reported as poor or very poor. The poor grazing conditions are forcing ranchers to dip into hay supplies, with some areas completely depleting their reserves. Across northeastern Oklahoma, where rainfall amounts are 10 inches below normal since June 1st, ranchers are moving cattle out of pastures where ponds have gone dry.

The weekend forecast from the National Weather Service indicates a likelihood of rainfall statewide, offering possible relief to some areas of the state. Unfortunately for Oklahoma's wheat belt, the rainfall chances are greater across central and eastern Oklahoma than across the western third of the state.

