

Drought Claims More Of State; Cotton Struggling

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Drought has claimed more than 94 percent of Arkansas, according to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor map, crisping pastures and causing the earliest planted cotton to struggle.

The map from the previous week showed just below 25 percent of Arkansas with a drought classification. Thursday's map shows the state at 94.4 percent all in the Delta. The map can be found at: http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/DM_state.htm?AR,S.

"Irrigation preparation should be at the top of the 'to do' list as we move into weeks of 90-plus degree weather and little rain in the forecast," Tom Barber, extension cotton agronomist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said on Friday.

The crop is starting to be stressed and is having trouble fighting off an annual enemy: tobacco thrips.

"When cotton is healthy, it can usually outgrow thrips, but this year, the slow-growing cotton has forced many growers to make multiple pesticide applications to control thrips," said Gus Lorenz, extension entomologist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "To make the situation worse, we have western flower thrips that are harder to kill."

Lorenz said many growers are having to switch to a more expensive treatment – difficult in a time when fuel and fertilizer are expensive and cotton prices are lagging.

Barber says research has shown that "by watering on time, we were able to prevent drought stress that ultimately delayed the cotton."

"Keep in mind that this crop may have a shallow root system from early season stresses," he

said. "In the fields where the taproots are permanently damaged from cool soil temperatures and seedling disease, timely irrigation will be critical."

In northeastern Arkansas, where there's moderate drought, "Most of our row crop fields are being irrigated – where available – to keep the crops going," said Mike Andrews, Randolph County extension staff chair. "Most of our forages are declining, as livestock nips off the forage it is not growing back. We need a good general rain across the whole county to get things growing again, especially the crops and forages that are not irrigated."

High winds on Thursday didn't help much.

"The wind was blowing 20 to 30 mph out of the south and really sapping what soil moisture was still available," Brent Griffin, Prairie County extension staff chair. "We have growers who have stopped planting soybeans due to the lack of moisture."

"We are fortunate that a large majority of soybean acres were planted earlier in the year," he said. "At least these acres can be row irrigated if on beds or large enough to flood irrigate if we have the water."

Griffin said the dry weather was taking its toll on water sources.

"Surface water sources are really dropping with the initial demand for flooding rice and corn irrigation," he said. "Wells are being connected to energy sources left and right to begin drawing water from underground sources."

Keith Perkins, Lonoke County extension agent, said that while things were looking pretty good, "don't put off irrigation waiting on a rain." △



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Dust devil whirls through a cotton field in Desha County. Drought was expanding its grip on Arkansas during the last full week of May 2012.

U of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture photo by Mary Hightower

