

Drought Making Pastures Disappear, Turning Fields To Powder

HARRISON, ARK.

With rain in last Thursday's forecast, Arkansas livestock and crop producers struggling with dying pastures and powder-dry fields are hoping for the best, but are prepared for the worst.

"I have lived in North Arkansas for 26 years and it's never looked more bleak. Even the bermuda lawns are all turning yellow and brown," said Mike McClintock, Boone County extension agent for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "It's great, if you are an iguana or horned toad."

McClintock said his office was receiving calls daily from cattle producers seeking hay as pastures wither. "With each bite of grass, nothing is growing back," he said. "The predicted 1.5 inches will not nearly be enough."

FORECAST TOTALS

The National Weather Service at Little Rock was forecasting a 50 percent chance of rain last Wednesday night and an 80 percent Thursday. Rainfall amounts were expected to range from 1 to 2 inches in western Arkansas, with some amounts possibly up to 2.5 inches. Elsewhere, totals of .5 to .75 of an inch would be more common.

The outlook for the Delta wasn't so promising.

"The trends that I am seeing suggest that some folks will be disappointed with the amounts they get, especially in the eastern half of the state, said John Robinson, warning coordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Little Rock. "It is possible that some spots may be missed altogether."

Farmers who want to plant soybeans following the winter wheat harvest are finding the soil too dry. Some farmers were rolling out extra polypipe tubing – that works like a big soaker hose – to irrigate dry areas, others were getting ready to turn on their irrigation pivots.

Some rain and hail was falling early Wednesday afternoon when a line of strong storms developed over the Delta.

"We have gotten a little and looking for more a bunch more," said Keith Perkins, Lonoke County extension agent for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "My Dad would say: 'some is good, more is better, and just the right amount is needed, but we will take all that we can get'."

Until that next rain falls, "Over here they are doing one thing: They are filling the diesel tanks so they can pump more water out of the ground," said Robert Goodson, Phillips and Lee county extension agent.

However, the downside to irrigation – at least in home gardens – are hungry insects. "If your garden is green, it's like a big green light saying 'come get lunch!'" McClintock said.

TINDER DRY

In some places, "tinder dry" is not an exaggeration.

In Van Buren County, "one farmer hit a rock and the sparks caught his hay field on fire," said Sherri Sanders, White County extension agent for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "He lost his field of hay, his tractor and baler." The man escaped without injury, she said.

Farm brush fires have also been reported in Pope County, said Staff Chair Phil Sims. He added that farmers harvesting wheat are moving the hot machinery "in the evenings to plowed ground in fear of a wheat field fire burning up trucks, trailers and combines."

Drought may also mean a bitter harvest – of cucumbers.

"Any stress on the plants can cause the plants to move an alkaloid called cucurbitin into the fruit," said Les Walz, Cleveland County extension staff chair for the U of A Division of Agriculture. "Cucurbitin is produced naturally in cucurbits but is usually confined to the foliage and stems. Stresses associated with high temperatures, uneven watering, disease, or low fertility could cause cucumbers to be bitter."

STRESS IS SHOWING



Corn grower irrigating his field on May 20, 2012, in Desha County, Ark. Drought is extending its grip on the state.

U of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture photo by Mary Hightower

In southwest Arkansas, so hard-hit in 2011, the few scattered showers that fell in the last few weeks were helpful. "Some areas still look pretty good, but others starting to show signs of drought," said Joe Paul Stuart, Little River County extension staff chair. "We had an abundance of ryegrass and clovers early, but they're gone and warm season grasses are very thin."

"If the dry weather pattern continues, we will be in trouble soon," he said.

The dry weather has been a benefit for fruit growers who are able to irrigate.

"Our largest blueberry grower said that the lack of rain has benefited him this spring because he has not had any soft berries," he said. "Our strawberry producers report the same, no fruit loss."

However, extension agents in several counties are reporting that ponds that supply irrigation are drying up. △