

Heat Wave Scorches Crops, Generates New Farm Bill Concerns

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Soaring temperatures, coupled with hot, dry winds, continue to suck the life out of corn and soybean plants across much of the Midwest. Although temperatures started to drop below 100 degrees, the ongoing drought is raising new concerns about the future of the farm bill and renewable energy policies based on using a portion of each year's crops.

According to USDA's weekly crop progress report, 40 percent of the corn crop is now rated good to excellent, down from 48 percent a week ago. One year ago, 69 percent of the crop was rated good to excellent.

The Dakotas have been relative bright spots, with 74 percent of the corn crop rated good to excellent in North Dakota and 60 percent in similar condition in South Dakota. But in Kansas, only 19 percent of the crop scored equal ratings in USDA's July 9 report.

In Illinois, just 19 percent of the corn is rated good to excellent and only 12 percent in Indiana and 28 percent in Ohio. Crops were also curling badly in Southeast Missouri, but in Iowa, corn is still standing tall in some parts of the state, with 46 percent rated good to excellent across the Hawkeye state.

"The week ending July first will go down as one of the worst weeks on record for crops across the Central Plains, the lower Midwest, the Mid-South and parts of the Southeast," noted USDA Weather Analyst Brad Rippey.

With growing conditions deteriorating for the fifth year in a row, USDA is expected to trim expected production during this week's crop report, raising concerns that losses will mirror the historic drought year of 1988.

"Probably the next two weeks will really determine what our yield will be," explained William Wiebold, professor of plant sciences in the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources last week. The next couple of weeks are critical for corn pollination, because silk growth and tassel pollen-shed must be in sync to create corn kernels. That coordination relies on water, he said.

Livestock feeders are especially nervous, trying to lock down supplies while prices are spiraling upward.

Indiana Farm Bureau President Don Villwock, who farms in southern Indiana, witnessed mostly zeroes in his rainfall report during June, with one field getting a "whopping" half-inch for the entire month. This past June was the third driest in Indiana, according to USDA records dating back to 1930, ranking only behind 1988 and 1933. Livestock producers in his state are already scrambling to figure out how to source feed for this fall and winter.

Villwock told Agri-Pulse that corn planted on

non-irrigated sandy fields is mostly destroyed, with much of what's left being chopped for silage or disked up.

"Soybeans were hanging in pretty good shape until this past week of 100+ degree heat," Villwock said. "First crop soybeans got up to the 3-6 inch stage and have been there for 30-45 days. But this past week, they were even turning pale white in the middle of the day. All of the double crop soybeans – even though they were planted two weeks early – are lying in dry dirt over much of the state. Some seeds that did get a shower to germinate soon died for lack of a follow up rain."

Villwock says most farmers have some level of crop insurance and will recover a portion of their economic losses. But this year's drought should serve as a not-so-subtle reminder to members of Congress who are crafting a new five-year farm bill, he emphasized.

Without crop insurance, many drought stricken farmers would be out of business next year. It's a point not lost on Sen. Pat Roberts, who worked to make the public/private crop insurance program the centerpiece of the Senate's version of the farm bill. But the House Agriculture Committee will take a different approach.

"During early debate on the 2012 farm bill, Indiana farmers stepped up and agreed to do away with direct payments, ethanol subsidies and other price supports in exchange for a strong and viable crop insurance program," Villwock added. "A farmer's biggest risk is the weather, a fact that is being hammered home in a big way this year, and weakening our current federal crop insurance program is unconscionable."

As the House Agriculture Committee starts marking up a new farm bill this week, farm state lawmakers will be promoting a new safety that improves on crop insurance, but also includes programs to protect against price and revenue loss. Although commodity prices are currently spiking with the drought conditions, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas is focused on making sure that producers are also protected during times of declining prices. He says it's a program that works for all crops and all regions.

Lawmakers and USDA officials are starting to look for ways to provide some state relief across drought-stricken regions, too. For example, Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman declared a statewide emergency to help deal with wildfires and parched fields. Missouri's congressional delegation called on USDA to release Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands to ease the enormous stress on livestock producers. The USDA National Organic Program granted a temporary variance to livestock operations suffering with ways to find forage in Wyoming. Δ

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