

Drought expands, but relief may be on way

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Drought conditions expanded last month amid weather that was warmer and drier across much of the western U.S., but spring rain in the agricultural Midwest could improve conditions for farmers preparing for the corn and soybean growing season.

Weekly data released by the National Drought Mitigation Center shows moderate drought or worse covered 36.8 percent of the U.S. as of late last week, up nearly five percentage points from the previous week but slightly below last year's levels. Over the last decade, the figure has ranged from 9 percent in 2010 to nearly 52 percent during the devastating drought of 2013.

Here's a look at the current conditions:

Farmers looking up

Some areas of Iowa, Illinois and Kentucky saw rain last week, and additional rain could move across the same area this week. But abnormally dry areas are beginning to reflect the lack of moisture from last fall and recent months, said Brian Fuchs, a climatologist at the center.

That's a change from the last few years, when too much rain left many farmers in parts of Iowa and Illinois unable to plant or work in their fields.

"The dryness is kind of a double-edged sword," Fuchs said. "They can get into the fields without fighting the wetness that traditionally for the last few years has been hampering some producers. But by the same token, dryness could start causing a problem down the road."

Data shows that drought conditions now cover 22 percent of the land used in U.S. corn production and 18 percent of soybean land. That's a spike compared to early March, when only 6 percent of corn-growing areas and 5 percent of the soybean region were dry.

The dry weather isn't helping winter wheat. Drought now covers to 42 percent of the area where the crop is grown, up from 33 percent in early March. During the winter and early spring months, the condition of the wheat crop had already sharply declined in Nebraska, South Dakota and Kansas, said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture who wrote the latest drought monitor report.

Wary months ahead

Kansas farmer Clay Scott said that this year, he hasn't seen the dirt storms he experienced in recent years. But he noted that the area is entering its fourth growing season in drought.

"There is a desperate need for rain right now," he said. "If we catch a good rain here shortly, we'll have a nice wheat crop here in southwest Kansas compared to last couple of years."

Scott, who farms around Ulysses, is planting around 2,000 acres of corn in dryland and irrigated fields. Climatologists

expect a wetter pattern to develop later this month, which gives farmers hope, he said.

Drought developed during March in much of central and northern Wisconsin, with 55 percent of the state in moderate drought. Nebraska, which reported no drought four weeks ago, is now experiencing moderate drought over 22 percent of its land.

A substantial jump also was reported in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In Colorado, coverage of severe drought jumped to 40 percent from 12 percent.

Dry West

Californians can attest to the impact as the state enters the fourth year of widespread drought. Gov. Jerry Brown has ordered the first-ever mandatory reductions in water usage, as drought now covers more than 98 percent of the state. Two-thirds of California is in extreme to exceptional drought.

The drought monitor measures drought in five levels ranging from abnormally dry which is short-term dryness that can hinder crop development to exceptional drought, which causes widespread crop loss and water shortages in reservoirs and streams leading to water emergencies.