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Nebraska Farmers Told to Halt Irrigation as Drought Drains Rivers

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(Reuters) - More than 1,100 farmers in Nebraska have been ordered by the state's Department of Natural Resources to halt irrigation of their crops because the rivers from which they draw water have dropped due to a worsening drought.

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The orders come as the central United States bakes under the worst drought in a quarter century which has parched corn and soybean crops and sent prices of both commodities to near-record highs.

As of Friday, orders have been sent to a total of 1,106 farmers in the country's No. 3 corn producing state and fourth-largest soybean state, the department confirmed on Monday.

The orders affected only irrigation systems that draw from surface water, mostly rivers and creeks, and not systems that draw from wells, a department spokesman said.

Nearly the entire state is under some level of drought, more than half of it classified as severe drought or worse, according to the weekly U.S. Drought Monitor.

Roughly half of the cropland and pasture in Nebraska is irrigated, unlike other top crop producing states like Iowa and Illinois which rely largely on rainfall.

There were about 46,800 farms and ranches operating in Nebraska in 2011 covering around 45.5 million acres, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

(Reporting by Karl Plume in Chicago; editing by Jim Marshall)

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