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Widespread Drought Is Likely to Worsen

By JOHN ELIGON

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The drought that has settled over more than half of the continental United States this summer is the most widespread in more than half a century. And it is likely to grow worse.

The latest outlook released by the National Weather Service on Thursday forecasts increasingly dry conditions over much of the nation's breadbasket, a development that could lead to higher food prices and shipping costs as well as reduced revenues in areas that count on summer tourism. About the only relief in sight was tropical activity in the Gulf of Mexico and the Southeast that could bring rain to parts of the South.

The unsettling prospects come at a time of growing uncertainty for the country's economy. With evidence mounting of a slowdown in the economic recovery, this new blow from the weather is particularly ill-timed.

Already some farmers are watching their cash crops burn to the point of no return. Others have been cutting their corn early to use for feed, a much less profitable venture.

"It really is a crisis. I don't think we've ever seen anything like this in my lifetime," Gov. Pat Quinn of Illinois said after touring ravaged farms in the southern part of the state.

The government has declared one-third of the nation's counties — 1,297 of them across 29 states — federal disaster areas as a result of the drought, which will allow farmers to apply for low-interest loans to get them through the disappointing growing season.

"It's got the potential to be the worst drought we've ever had in Arkansas," said Butch Calhoun, the state's secretary of agriculture. "It's going to be very detrimental to our economy."

What is particularly striking about this dry spell is its breadth. Fifty-five percent of the continental United States — from California to Arkansas, Texas to North Dakota — is in moderate to extreme drought, according to the government, the largest such area since December 1956. An analysis released on Thursday by the United States Drought Task Force showed that 88 percent of corn and 87 percent of soybean crops in the country



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drought-stricken regions, a 10 percent jump from a week before. Corn and soybean prices reached record highs on Thursday, with corn closing just over \$8.07 a bushel and soybeans trading as high as \$17.49.

As of Sunday, more than half of the corn in seven states was in poor or very poor condition, according to the Department of Agriculture. In Kentucky, Missouri and Indiana, that figure is above 70 percent. Over all, only 31 percent of the nation's corn is in good to excellent condition, compared with 66 percent at the same time last year.

"We're expecting significant reductions in production potential yield, potential for corn and soybeans in particular," said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the Department of Agriculture.

The withering corn has increased feed prices and depleted available feeding land, putting stress on cattle farmers. A record 54 percent of pasture and rangeland — where cattle feed or where hay is harvested for feeding — was in poor or very poor condition, according to the Department of Agriculture. Many farmers have been forced to sell their animals.

Because feed can account for nearly half of a cattle farmer's costs, consumers could see a rise in the price of meat and dairy products, experts said. The high sustained heat has led the key components in milk, like fat and protein, to plummet more than usual, said Chris Galen, a spokesman for National Milk Producers Federation.

"This is due to cows eating less dry matter, and drinking more water ... which tends to thin out the resulting milk output," he said in an e-mail. "So, if you're a cheese maker, you need to use a little more milk to get the same volume of cheese output."

Still, this year's drought is not expected to be as rough on Midwestern agriculture as the one in 1988. Corn yields were 22 percent under trend that year, and this year the Department of Agriculture is projecting yields 11 percent under trend — "though that could change in August," said Joseph W. Glauber, the department's chief economist.

Many also believe that farmers are better situated this year to handle the impact of a drought than they were two decades ago. More than 80 percent of corn and soybeans are estimated to be insured, Mr. Glauber said.

Last year, crop insurers paid a record \$11 billion in indemnity payments, and that "should serve as a good model for what farmers can expect this year," Tom Zacharias, the president of National Crop Insurance Services, said in a news release.

But the impact of this drought has extended beyond farming. In Missouri, the torrid conditions have sparked forest fires that resemble the types of wildfires seen in the West. Already, 117

wildfires have burned in Missouri's Mark Twain National Forest, a record-setting pace. Conditions have been so dry that there was a report of hay in a barn combusting on its own.

Meanwhile, water levels are falling in town reservoirs as well as major waterways like the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Barge and towboat operators have been reducing the size of their loads because of the low water, said Ann M. McCulloch, a spokeswoman for the American Waterways Operators. This means shipping operators, who transport a variety of goods from crops to gravel, have had to take more trips, increasing transportation costs that could be passed on to consumers.

Officials in Augusta, Kan., estimate that they have 110 days worth of water that they can draw from a nearby reservoir. The primary reservoir used for their municipal water supply dropped too low last year, the result of a drought in the area that started two years ago, said Josh Shaw, the assistant to the city manager. Indianapolis has put restrictions on water use; south of the city, Johnson County banned smoking at the county fair.

In Colorado, there is concern that the drought could damage forage that deer, elk and other game feed on in the fall. But the state also has seen advantages from the drought. Lower water levels have been helpful for fly fishing, and, with fewer places for animals to drink water, they will likely gather in concentrated areas, making conditions better for hunting.

And one Indianapolis painter is making the best of the situation, according to The Indianapolis Star, by starting a new arm of his business: painting brown lawns green.

Monica Davey contributed reporting from Chicago, Mashid Mohadjerin from Augusta, Kan., and Joanna M. Foster from New York.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 24, 2012

A picture caption on Friday with an article about the severe drought settling over more than half of the continental United States misstated the surname of the two men shown on a farm in El Dorado, Kan. They are David and Arlan Stackley, not Tackley.

