

Research Highlights

Nature Reports Climate Change

Published online: 22 October 2009 | doi:10.1038/climate.2009.108

Southeast drought

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***J. Clim.* doi:10.1175/2009JCLI2683.1 (2009)**

A recent drought that struck the southeastern United States was largely the result of rising demand for water, rather than human-induced climate change, suggests a new study.

A team led by Richard Seager of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University in Palisades, New York, investigated the nature and cause of the drought, which began in the winter of 2005–2006 and lasted two years. The team used a wide range of data in their analysis, including satellite and ground-based precipitation measurements, tree-ring records of moisture over the last millennium, model-simulated atmospheric conditions from 1856 to 2007 and climate change projections from the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They found that the recent event was typical for the region, where long and severe droughts have occurred in earlier centuries. Climate models differ considerably in their estimates of how climate change will affect the hydrology of the southeastern US, on average predicting a modest increase in precipitation and evaporation, with the overall outcome highly uncertain.

They authors warn that climate change should not be relied upon to solve the region's water woes and that it could make matters worse rather than better.



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Nature Reports Climate Change EISSN 1753-9315

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