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Parts of Texas see worst drought on record

At least nine counties see driest times in more than a century

AP Associated Press

updated 3:32 p.m. PT, Fri., Aug 14, 2009

DALLAS - The most parched areas of Texas have been wilting in the blistering heat for two years, but only now is it now official: This is their worst drought in recorded history.

Texas state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon said Friday that at least nine of the 254 counties in Texas — the nation's most drought-stricken state — are suffering through their driest conditions since modern record-keeping began in 1895.

Making matters worse are the relentless 100-degree days across the southern portion of Texas that has been under drought conditions since September 2007.

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The impact has been felt most by farmers and ranchers in the nation's No. 2 agriculture-producing state. Texas officials estimate statewide crop and livestock losses from the drought at \$3.6 billion.

"We've had some dry spells, but not as bad as this," said Rod Santa Ana with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. "It hurts bad. A lot of these cotton fields didn't even come up. It's just bare ground. You'd never know cotton was even planted there."

The worst hit counties are Bastrop, Caldwell and Lee in Central Texas, and Victoria, Bee, San Patricio, Live Oak, Jim Wells and Duval in south-central Texas, Nielsen-Gammon said. He studied precipitation over several three-year periods and

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concluded the historic drought level in those counties.

Roughly half the state is under some form of drought. About 26 percent — a large swath of Central and South Texas — is suffering through the worst two categories of drought. Texas is the only state in the U.S. with areas enduring the worst category, according to the latest U.S. Department of Agriculture Drought Monitor map. Small areas in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Hawaii are in the second-worst category.

For the first time since 1904, the entire cotton crop was wiped out this year in Kleberg County, which borders two of the historically drought-stricken counties in South Texas and has seen only 2 inches of rain since January. The county typically gets 27 to 28 inches of rain in a 12-month period and produces between 30,000 and 40,000 acres of cotton.

Larry Falconer, an AgriLife Extension economist in Corpus Christi, estimated the economic hit to Kleberg County alone at about \$50 million.

In nearby Nueces County, 95 percent of the cotton crop failed, and more than 90 percent failed in San Patricio County.

Lots of days over 100

The heat has made the drought even more unbearable. There have been 57 days over 100 degrees in the San Antonio area this year and 54 days in the Austin area. Both typically see an average of about 12 days.

Jim Wells County has seen 78 days over 100 (up from an average of 20), Live Oak Canyon has had 71 (up from 36), and Victoria has had 33 (up from 5).

"Everywhere down here has been hurting," said Roger Gass, a weather service meteorologist in Corpus Christi.

While about half of the state isn't experiencing drought, the rest is suffering. Austin's Lake Travis is at its third-lowest level ever and has closed all its boat docks. Wildlife has been creeping into developments in search of water, and cities across the state are restricting water usage. Kerrville even shut down the city pool.

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Conditions should improve in September, but for many farmers and ranchers it won't really matter.

"If you're crops already failed, it doesn't matter how much rainfall you're missing from here on out," Nielsen-Gammon said.

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