

## **Farmers Face Shortages if Drought Endures**

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EL PASO -- Farmers along the Rio Grande in New Mexico and far West Texas are bracing for a continuing drought that could force them to start growing more water-efficient crops and reducing the number of acres they plant.

Despite some heavy late-winter rain and snow storms in the Southwest, a report released Thursday by the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service doesn't bode well for Rio Grande water users.

"The system that did bring the record precipitation didn't really find its way into the central and northern part" of New Mexico, said Richard Armijo, a snow surveyor with the Albuquerque-based NRCS.

Because of that, water stored in the Elephant Butte Reservoir in central New Mexico will again be drawn down this year and, if conditions don't improve, water reserves could be used up in the next few years, said Wayne Treers, a hydraulic engineer with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

Although the snowpack in the mountains of Northern New Mexico and southwest Colorado, which drains into the Rio Grande, was better this year than last, it represents the eighth year in a row of below-average flow.

Snow in the two states accounts for about 70 percent of the water going through the Rio Grande into Elephant Butte Reservoir. That water supplies Southern New Mexico, El Paso, West Texas and Mexico.

"Right now things are looking better. In fact, the runoff is really picking up steam right now," Treers said.

Subtracting the water already spoken for, the flow into Elephant Butte Reservoir is expected to be about 52 percent of the long-term average, Treers said. Last year, the flow was about 11 percent of the long-term average.

Last year, water users received about 33 percent of the supply they were legally entitled to under state-registered water rights and interstate and international agreements. It was the first time in 25 years that water managers had been unable to provide a full supply of water.

This year, water users should receive about 53 percent of a full supply, he said.

"What this means in terms of irrigation for the farmers is two or three more waterings at the end of the season," Treers said.

However, to supply enough water for recent allotments, water managers have had to dip into the dwindling Elephant Butte reserves. Businesses

in Elephant Butte and Truth or Consequences have complained that low water levels are chasing away the tourist trade.

"Since 1996, we've had below-normal runoffs into the Butte, and the last two years have been exceedingly low, rivaling the '50s when we had the last prolonged drought," Treers said.

"If we don't start getting better runoff in the next couple of years, things are going to be pretty dismal," Treers said.

Gary Esslinger, manager of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District, said farmers will hope for good monsoon rains this summer to supplement the river water, he said. "If that happens, then we can bridge the gap," Esslinger said.

Although Esslinger said he doesn't anticipate any radical change in the usual crops of pecans, cotton, alfalfa, chile, lettuce and onions, he said there might be a shift to cotton, which doesn't require as much water.

Esslinger said farmers drilled wells to cope with the 1950s drought.

"Now we're facing this drought, and this one may be the worst," he said. If the drought continues, "we might see a reduction in irrigated land because the wells can't provide irrigation for all the land."

Esslinger said the ground water is recharged by river flow, and with more people moving into the Rio Grande Valley, "there are more straws in the glass."

He said the water table has been dropping in recent years, but the dynamics still aren't well understood, and it's hard to predict how robust the supply will be.

"Right now it's healthy, but I don't know how long we can continue with a sustained drought," Esslinger said.

Jesus Reyes, general manager of Texas' El Paso County Water Improvement District, said the district has been cooperating with the city to drill wells.

As of next week, the district will have 62 wells in El Paso's lower valley and on the city's east side. An additional five wells are planned for the upper valley, he said.

"What's going to be scary is next year," he said.