

No end in sight

Meteorologists say drought conditions should continue at least until spring

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After one of the driest years on record, meteorologists say there's not much to look forward to except more drought.

"My feeling is at least the first half of the year will be below-normal precipitation," Lower Colorado River Authority meteorologist Bob Rose said. "We might see changes in that by the late summer and fall."

KVET-KASE meteorologist Troy Kimmel, who also teaches meteorology at the University of Texas, agreed.

"Given the pattern we're in," Kimmel said, "I feel sure we'll continue in this dry pattern for the balance of the winter and into the spring."

Long-range weather predictions are tricky. The Old Farmer's Almanac predicts them a year in advance. But the almanac's forecast of a cool-and-wet 2005-06 Central Texas winter already is good only for laughs.

Kimmel doesn't usually make predictions beyond seven days. Rose does, but he doesn't like to. Even the National Weather Service has shied away from long-range predictions in recent years.

The Climate Prediction Center is taking a stand only through March, calling for warm and dry in Central Texas.

Beyond March, the prediction center will say only that it foresees "equal chances" of normal or abnormal temperatures and precipitation.

But, for now, most meteorologists are willing to extend the pattern of the past few months. When they see a pattern as old as the current dry one, sticking with the pattern is less risky.

"We've been below normal on rainfall since August," Rose said, although it was starting to get dry in April, the 12th-driest April at Camp Mabry in West Austin.

In June, after 29 days without rain, the month became the sixth-driest June at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

Last year was plenty hot, culminating in the warmest September recorded in Austin. There were 26 days of 100 degrees or higher, the worst since the 40 such days of 2001. Ten days were at normal temperatures.

Newcomers to Texas wonder why droughts are so common. Part of the reason is the state's location on the planet, on the eastern edge of the "Great American Desert," where dry heat is the norm.

Texas also sits at about 30 degrees north latitude, where, on the other side of the world, the great deserts of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are found. So Texas is in good latitudinal company for droughts.

Droughts have plagued Texas at least once a decade for most of its recorded history. The father of Texas, Stephen F. Austin, was reported to have lost his first crops to an 1822 drought, and it's been touch-and-go ever since.

The Austin area's last severe drought was just five years ago, from 1998 to 2000.

Rose is putting his hopes for an end to the drought on this year's hurricane season, which begins in June but doesn't really get under way until August.

"We're looking at another active hurricane season, which may bring more rain to us by late summer," he said. "Otherwise, I just don't see any changes that would bring us even normal precipitation. But that could change."

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