

Drought here has a capital D

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Washed by less than 11 inches of cool rain over 11 very dry months, the San Antonio region was declared to be under the most severe category of drought conditions Thursday.

The National Drought Mitigation Center reclassified the San Antonio area and a large part of South Texas as suffering under "exceptional" drought conditions — the most intense of five drought categories.

An exceptional drought is declared after widespread crop and pasture losses, extreme fire risk and shortages of water in reservoirs, streams and wells, creating water emergencies.

The center, based at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, works with several federal agencies to assess the country's drought situation and issues a weekly map and report.

"What's really capped it off has been the dryness of the late fall and winter period, coupled with the warmth and winds we've seen," said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist with the drought center. "The pattern has been pretty persistent where high pressure has kind of rebuffed any moisture from coming up from the gulf.

"There hasn't been a lot of moisture coming in off the Pacific due to La Niña, and all of these ingredients are adding up to where we're at now and it doesn't look good as we go into spring," he said. "And the impacts will surely follow soon — not just the fires, but the crops, the water situation and the soil moisture situation. I wish I had better news to share."

"It's the worst I've ever seen it," said Kenneth Cole, who farms in Uvalde and Zavala counties. "I've talked to a lot of older people and they say it resembles 1956. But at least in that 7-year drought period, they say, they would get a half-inch or a quarter-inch every now and then. But we haven't had nothing."

Cole, who was planting corn Thursday, said he feels especially sorry for livestock producers who depend on selling calves for a living because there's no grass and no hay, and they're having to sell off their herds.

"We've had to irrigate twice just to get the seeds to germinate," Cole said. "It's costing us a fortune. When the seeds start coming up, I think all the wildlife, because they're starving to death — the deer and the hogs and everything — they're going to just inundate us because there's nothing else for them to eat.

"I think it's going to be a futile effort," he said. "I think in the end, Mother Nature's going to win."

So far, water supplies are holding up, but officials fear that with spring and summer approaching and forecasters calling for continued dry weather, the aquifers that provide most local water supplies could fall to levels that trigger mandatory water restrictions.

The water level in the Edwards Aquifer — the primary drinking water source for San Antonio and many others in South-Central Texas — on Thursday was at 673 feet above sea level, 4 feet above the historical average level for March. Drought restrictions kick in when the level drops to 650 feet.

"The more people do now to conserve water, that will help us put off mandatory restrictions as long as possible," said Margaret Garcia, spokeswoman for the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

The San Antonio Water System is projecting residents will have to deal with water restrictions this summer for the first time since 2000, said Karen Guz, conservation director for the utility. Drought restrictions were declared in June 2002, but heavy rains began the next day, leading to major flooding.

"Our worst-case scenario is that it could be April that we hit 650 feet," Guz said. "What we're really hoping is that we don't hit it until July."

Under drought restrictions imposed in San Antonio and most cities in the region, landscape sprinkling would be limited to once a week on designated days if the level falls to 650 feet.

Some homeowners are philosophical about crunchy lawns and withered shrubs.

"It's San Antonio and we have droughts," Rich Maley, 42, said as he hosed off the cover of a house fan in the middle of his brown front lawn. "I've been here 25 years; they come and they go. You can't sweat the small stuff. Just let it die."

His wife, Liz, 47, disagreed. She plans to follow SAWS guidelines for watering lawns this spring.

"I'm going to water the grass with the 1 inch that they say," she said, jostling her husband's arm. "Once a week and the lawn will be healthier."

"Customers are asking what are their options," said Peter Garza, assistant manager at Calloway's Nursery in the 3700 block of Broadway.

He advises customers to buy mulch material to keep root systems cool and buy plants that are drought-tolerant.

May and June typically are the area's two wettest months, but climatologists say the weather phenomenon known as La Niña should last at least through June, keeping the southern United States hotter and drier than normal.

La Niña — Spanish for "little girl" — is a cyclical cooling of sea surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of South America.

The 10.92 inches of rainfall in San Antonio in the past 11 months — 35 percent of normal — is the fourth lowest in any 11-month period since records were kept beginning in 1871, behind only two stretches between February 1917 and January 1918 and one from September 1955 to July 1956, according to a review of the records by the San Antonio Express-News.

"I don't really see any drought busters in the forecast," said Monte Oaks, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in New Braunfels.

He said there are slight chances of light rain over the weekend, then a little better chance in mid-week.

"The mild La Niña they're projecting is indicative of continued below-normal precipitation, so the big concern over the next few months is if we'll get enough rain," Oaks said.