

Drought only gets worse

Web Posted: 08/25/2006 11:06 PM CDT

Jerry Needham

Express-News Staff

With relentless heat continuing to bake the region, and August 2006 on track to become the hottest month in San Antonio history, a 17-month-long drought shows no sign of ending soon.

The request was aimed at landowners along the Guadalupe, San Antonio, Nueces, Concho and Lavaca river basins, as well as those along creeks in coastal basins from the Lavaca to the Rio Grande.

"I had several people complaining about people watering very large lawns that were right next to a river with these water cannons — just going back and forth, watering very large acreage just for the appeal of having green grass," said Al Segovia, South Texas and Concho River Basin Watermaster for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

"When we're having to ration off water to some cities, we think it's only proper that we ask people to conserve water," Segovia said.

Riverside landowners normally can use water from streams alongside their property for domestic and livestock use without getting a state permit. But the continuing drought and falling water levels mean water needs to be conserved for more important uses, Segovia said. Aquifer levels have been plummeting. Many cities in the region have declared mandatory or voluntary water restrictions.

San Antonio and other cities using the Edwards Aquifer have been under mandatory restrictions since July 20. Some utilities and homeowners using the Trinity Aquifer north of San Antonio are having to deepen wells or truck in water.

Rainfall at San Antonio International Airport since April 1, 2005, has been 20.52 inches, only 42.3 percent of normal.

The drought, which has led to an estimated \$4.1 billion in agricultural losses across the state just this year, also has caused untold millions of dollars in damage to home foundations that have shifted and cracked in the dry clay soils dominant in the state.

Rob Willis, general manager of Olshan Foundation Repair in San Antonio, said his company has a six-week backlog just to go out and assess a foundation.

The lack of rain has caused serious reductions in stream flows.

For example, the Medina River near Bandera, whose normal flow this time of year is 42 cubic feet per second (cfs), has dropped to 4 cfs. The Guadalupe River's flow at Kerrville is less than a third of normal.

The Guadalupe dropped so low Thursday at Victoria the city had to stop withdrawing drinking water and declare Stage I of its drought plan for the first time.

The average temperatures for January through July make 2006 the hottest such period ever recorded in San Antonio, and, so far, August is shaping up to be the hottest of any month ever recorded — beating out two previous Julys.

The 88.4-degree average through Aug. 24 was well ahead of the 88.1 recorded in July in both 1980 and 1998.

And Friday's record-tying high of 102 will only add to it.

"We are on track for the warmest month on record," said Bob Fogarty, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's forecast office in New Braunfels. "Our feeling at this point is that the heat is going to continue."

In fact, the latest long-term outlooks from the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center call for temperatures to remain above average around this part of Texas until fall 2007. And, unless the tropics blow a rainmaker our way, dry times are expected to last into November, according to long-term outlooks.

Tropical Storm Ernesto formed in the Caribbean on Friday with a projected path into the middle of the Gulf of Mexico by mid-week, but it's too early to know if it will end up in Texas. A cool front expected to move through late Monday and Tuesday will bring some chances of rain through the week, forecasters said.

The latest monthly outlooks released last week by the Climate Prediction Center show promise for a real break in the drought for Central and South Texas by December, with the spate of wet times predicted to last until March or April.