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DROUGHT: Area has had less than 10 percent of its average rainfall for last 6 months

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The Rio Grande Valley's landscape looks brittle and brown for good reason.

The region is enduring its driest winter and spring in recorded history, quickly sending the region into an extreme drought, Texas' state climatologist said Friday.

According to John Nielsen-Gammon, state climatologist at Texas A&M University, the deep South Texas region saw the driest October through March in more than a century of record-keeping, and the trend is continuing in April, he said.

"Deep South Texas has had less than 10 percent of its average rainfall for the last six months," Nielsen-Gammon said. "Last year, we had a wet spring and summer, and then the water faucet just shut off."

Without some rainfall relief, it is likely that the Valley will be in an exceptional drought - the worst type - by June, said Alfredo Vega, meteorologist for the National Weather Service office in Brownsville.

Even the rain that's possible over this weekend is unlikely to be enough to satiate the soil's thirst, Vega said.

"It's going to take quite a bit of rainfall to catch up ... at least four to six inches area-wide to get us back to normal," he said. From Jan. 1 through April 25, McAllen had received 1.6 inches of rain, Harlingen about 2 inches and Brownsville 1.8 - each city at least 3 inches short of its usual rainfall totals by this time, the National Weather Service reports.

As of April 22, the latest figures available, most of Starr and Hidalgo counties are under an extreme drought, and Cameron and Willacy counties are under a severe drought, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center.

In a severe drought, crop or pasture losses are likely and water shortages are common. In an extreme drought, areas can face significant crop or pasture losses and widespread water shortages.

However, the Rio Grande Valley region is in good shape with its water supply, if not the moisture in the soil.

As of mid-April, the United States' portion of water storage in the binational Falcon and Amistad reservoirs, on which the Valley relies heavily in times of drought, is nearly at capacity, said Carlos Rubinstein, regional director for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the region's watermaster.

"That means we certainly have plenty of water in the reservoirs to meet our demand and still be able to start next year in relatively good shape," he said.

That stored water has also helped citrus growers survive this dry season.

"We're better off now than in times (of drought) when we also had a water shortage," said Ray Prewett, president of Texas Citrus Mutual, an association of citrus growers and sellers. "We have enough irrigation water for the next couple of years."

The drought did hurt this year's citrus crop slightly, Prewett said. The fruit was smaller and of somewhat lesser quality, he said.

Some growers might have to wait to cultivate this year's crops because of the drought, however, Nielsen-Gammon said.

Likely the biggest danger during the Valley's drought is the risk of fire, said Vega of the National Weather Service. Last year's rainfall caused grasses and vegetation to flourish, but now in this year's drought the green grass has given way to brown, making it easy for fires to start.

Hidalgo and Cameron counties have both been under a burn ban since early 2008, and that's likely to continue until the Valley receives more rain, county officials said.

Nielsen-Gammon is hopeful, though, that the next few months will bring some rain, and lessen drought dangers.

"I do expect some recovery," he said.