ENVIRONMENT
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Central Texas still in grips of drought

Cities are asked to cut back and farmers and ranchers suffer, but little rain is expected through early next year.

By Asher Price
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Charles Fritsch typically waits until the first of November to supplement the grass his cattle eat with hay at his Twin Creek Ranch in eastern Travis County. But an exceptionally dry year has left little grass on the 175-acre ranch , forcing Fritsch for weeks to buy some hay at escalating prices.

"We've had a dry year, then a wet year and now a dry year," said Fritsch, who said drought has driven hay prices from $45 a bale to more than $80 a bale. "We'd just like to get back to a normal year."

As winter nears, federal authorities describe South Texas, the Panhandle and most of West Texas as not experiencing even mild drought. But across Central Texas, drought has stifled water supplies already taxed by a hot summer and never-ending demand. Exact definitions differ, but drought is often described as a period when an area receives less than 75 percent of its average annual precipitation. Average yearly rainfall for Austin is 34 inches; so far this year, 15 inches have fallen.

In the latest sign of stress on area water resources, Jacob's Well, a prized spring in northern Hays County, went dry earlier this month. It was the first time since 2000 and only the second time since pioneers settled in the area, said David Baker , executive director of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association.

Jacob's Well is fed by the Trinity Aquifer and has been flowing intermittently since last week. It is the primary source of water for Cypress Creek, which runs through Wimberley.
"Losing the flow to Jacob's Well is a signal that the aquifer is stressed and we all need to conserve water immediately," Baker said.

Jacob's Well is not the only spring in trouble. Spring flow at Barton Springs in Austin is hovering around 20 cubic feet per second, far below the average late October flow of 58 cubic feet per second, according to U.S. Geological Survey records.

The Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District could declare a critical stage drought early next month if dry conditions continue. If that happens, the district will demand that the 60,000 or so residents in southern Travis and northern Hays County that rely on the Barton Springs portion of the aquifer cut their water consumption by 30 percent. Other water utilities, including Austin's, have urged conservation and implemented seasonal watering schedules to limit lawn irrigation.

Lakes Travis and Buchanan, sources of much of the drinking water in the Austin area, have also taken a hit. Levels are low at the bodies of water northwest of Austin; most locations that feed the lakes have received 50 to 75 percent the normal amount of rain, the Lower Colorado River Authority said.

Rainfall records at Camp Mabry in West Austin that date to 1856 indicate that September was the third-driest on record.

The current drought can be traced to the last four months of 2007. That period was among the 10 driest September-through-December periods on record, with area rainfall generally 25 to 50 percent of normal, said Bob Rose , chief meteorologist at the river authority.

This year didn't provide much relief, Rose said.

Temperatures soared in May, a typically wet month. From there, little rain and the hottest summer on record continued the crunch on water. Big weather systems that soaked other parts of Texas — notably Hurricane Ike, which slammed into the Gulf Coast on Sept. 13 — bypassed the Austin area.

"I'm not confident we're going to break this drought any time soon," Rose said.

The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook, a forecast maintained by the National Weather Service, expects the drought to persist through January.

Many prognosticators differ on what the current conditions mean for the spring.

The river authority predicts that it won't have to curtail water for downriver agricultural customers, which it was forced to do in early 2007 before rains broke a serious drought.

And the region's famous wildflowers, which don't like too much rain, could still bloom on schedule, said Mark Simmons, an ecologist with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

"Bluebonnets don't like too much competition from grasses, and grasses have been kind of stressed," Simmons said. "In some respects, the conditions could be favorable for bluebonnets."

The drought has led to pain for farmers in Williamson County, said Robert Whitney , an agriculture county extension agent. Corn crops in the county usually yield about 100 bushels per acre, and last year's total was more than 9 million bushels. This year, the yield is down to 60 bushels per acre. Sorghum yields, which totaled more than 1.2 million bushels last year, are off by 25 percent. Cotton yields, which added up to 46,000 bales in 2007, are down 50 percent. Many farmers in Williamson County are holding off on planting their fall wheat crop because of the lack of rain, Whitney said. "We can't go out there in a dry field and leave that seed in there."

The land could use some sustained rains, Whitney said. "There's no bottom moisture out there at all. And if we don't have bottom moisture, we can't make this crop."

Bastrop County extension agent Jeff Watts said, "If we have a dry winter, all the producers are going to be hoping and praying for a real wet spring."

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Rainfall by year (in inches)
1900 53.99
1901 19.5
1902 32.86
1903 36.23
1904 37.91
1905* 36
1906 21.49
1907 30.07
1908 30.07
1909 20.57
1910 24.65
1911 22.6
1912 20.37
1913 49
1914 42.7
1915 41.39
1916 29.26
1917 15.58
1918 27.92
1919 64.68
1920 38.68
1921 51.73
1922 37.32
1923 51.24
1924 33.46
1925 28.19

1926 39.33
1927 34.83
1928 26.75
1929 38.07
1930 35.74
1931 31.61
1932 32.46
1933 30.44
1934 32.75
1935 43.01
1936 39.9
1937 35.1
1938 27.03
1939 22.13
1940 42.95
1941 46.21
1942 34.64
1943 24.74
1944 42.97
1945 40.87
1946 47.28
1947 21.58
1948 20.98
1949 36.34
1950 25.79
1951 28.98
1952 27.71
1953 29.68
1954 11.42
1955 22.54
1956 15.41
1957 51.3
1958 41.02
1959 34.96
1960* 35.81
1961 36.47
1962 33.48
1963* 17.3
1964 32.97
1965 40.57
1966 25.19
1967 33.54
1968 38.72
1969 33.59
1970 30.64
1971 24.95
1972 26.07
1973 40.46
1974 36.21
1975 36.81
1976 41.25
1977 22.14
1978 30.97
1979 37.5
1980 27.38
1981 45.73
1982 26.63
1983 33.98
1984 26.3
1985 32.49
1986 35.01
1987 36.66

1988 19.21
1989 25.87
1990 28.44
1991 52.21
1992 46.05
1993 26.5
1994 41.16
1995* 33.98
1996 29.56
1997 47.04
1998 39.11
1999 23.93
2000 37.96
2001 42.9
2002 35.98
2003 21.43
2004 52.27
2005 22.33
2006 34.7
2007 46.95
* Data may contain incomplete values.
Source: National Weather Service