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**1/2009**

## **AP/WOAI: Texas headed back into drought conditions**

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) - Longtime rancher Barbara Mazurek remembers watching her father fall into despair while trying to keep their Central Texas spread afloat during the state's worst drought in the 1950s.

Now, looking across her parched ranch near the one where she grew up, those days don't seem so long ago.

"It's beginning to look like that," the 72-year-old rancher said. "It was terrible. I remember that well."

Despite hurricanes Dolly, Gustav and Ike soaking Texas in 2008, about 58 percent of the nation's second largest agricultural state is in some stage of drought, according to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor map, released Jan. 6. That's up from about 30 percent in mid-October.

Parts of Central Texas and the Hill Country - about 4.2 percent of the state - are in exceptional drought, the most severe stage of dryness. Three months ago none of the state was that parched.

Texas received an average of 24.6 inches of rain last year, the 31st driest year since 1884. That's 3.3 inches below the normal average of 27.9 inches.

And conditions are expected to worsen before they improve.

Most everywhere west of Midland and north of Waco are expected to move from abnormally dry to moderate drought when the weekly drought map is released Thursday.

"The outlook is not rosy," [National Weather Service](#) meteorologist Victor Murphy in Fort Worth said. "I'm fearing for the worst and hoping for the best."

The worst area lies within a circular area that runs from Austin to LaGrange to Victoria to Eagle Pass to Junction and back to Austin.

The San Antonio area in 2008 had its third driest year since 1871 and the driest since 1954. Similarly, Austin had its fourth driest year on record and driest since 1956.

The state began to dry out in about September 2007 after nine months that produced record rainfall. The 16-month period ending in 2008 was the driest ever for San Antonio.

Though Mazurek and others see conditions similar to those about five decades ago, the state isn't there yet, said state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon who works at Texas A&M University.

"If we hadn't had a wet 2007, those areas would be rivaling the drought of the 1950s," he said.

The scant chances for rain the next three months doesn't bode well for already heightened fire concerns and threats to cattle herds in need of green grazing areas. Burn bans are in effect in 95 of the state's 254 counties.

The cause is a La Nina [weather](#) pattern settling over the central Pacific Ocean, bringing with it the likelihood of below normal rainfall and above normal temperatures.

Everyone in agriculture is concerned. Cattle producers are culling their animals, pulling cattle off pastures and making arrangements for supplement feed. Those planting crops this time of year are waiting for moisture.

"There's not anything on the surface," said Travis Miller, a drought specialist with Texas AgriLife Extension Service. "In a perfect world we could get rain just when we need it. It almost never happens."

Low soil moisture levels were critical in some areas, limiting the planting of winter wheat and possibly even spring wheat if rainfall patterns don't change, according to reports from Texas AgriLife Extension Service agents throughout the state.

Some agricultural producers in East Texas got adequate rains in 2008. Those areas have moisture in the soil that will buffer them for up to a month without more rain.

The situation is getting serious, Miller said, and if no rain comes producers planting could become a big gamble.

"When you go into a season and there's no soil moisture it's risky," Miller said. "It goes up exponentially. It's like starting a business with no money in the bank."

Since 2004, Texas has gone from having periods of ample rain to periods of not enough. For example, Victoria in 2007 got 71.8 inches of rain, the second wettest year on record. Last year Victoria got just 21.7 inches, the fifth driest year.

Drought plagued the state from spring 2005 through 2006, when crop and livestock losses were the state's worst in a single year, totaling \$4.1 billion.

Rainfall swings are a fact of life, though.

"This points out the importance for Texans to be keenly aware of the need for resiliency against climate variability and the ability for Texans to be able to mitigate these wild swings from exceedingly wet to exceedingly dry."

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