

Despite recent rains, drought far from over, experts warn

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Most of Central and East Texas beat long odds with heavy rains this winter, but experts warned state lawmakers Thursday that the drought is far from over.

State climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon said that the second year of a La Niña cycle — cooler temperatures in the Pacific Ocean that influence global weather patterns — produces a dry winter for Texas "4 times out of 5."

But Nielsen-Gammon said it's a coin toss whether the recent winning streak will continue. "The (short-term) outlook is not particularly dire or good," he said.

The U.S. Drought Monitor, a summary of drought conditions that was updated Thursday, showed how quickly conditions can change. As recently as Oct. 4, 88 percent of the state was categorized as being in "exceptional" drought, the most severe level. On Thursday's map, about 18 percent of the state remained in that category.

Central Texas reflected the unpredictable nature of the drought today. Moving from east to west, Travis County ranges from "abnormally dry" — which passes for good news after the worst single-year drought on record — to moderate and severe drought conditions.

Nielsen-Gammon said that most of the winter rains fell on the most populated areas of the state.

"The people of Texas are going to tend to forget a drought is still going on in many parts of Texas," he said.

In parts of the Panhandle and far West Texas, Nielsen-Gammon said, the drought has gotten worse this winter.

Despite the rains and the short-term forecast, Nielsen-Gammon said he still believes Texas remains in a long-term drought cycle.

"We are more likely to get droughts over the next decade than the one after that," he said.

Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, investigating how to deal with the drought, heard from more than 30 witnesses Thursday.

Becky Motal, general manager of the Lower Colorado River Authority, said lakes Travis and Buchanan are only 46 percent full and that new water supplies are needed. She outlined her goal of adding 100,000 acre-feet of water, enough for 300,000 homes, in five years. An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of surface area to a depth of 1 foot.

Rep. Allan Ritter, the Nederland Republican who chairs the committee, thanked LCRA for tackling an ambitious goal.

"I hope this is more than talk. We need action," Ritter said. "We want to see that commitment fulfilled and done."

Among the long list of projects, Motal said there would be a pilot project on storing water in an aquifer, which would help reduce evaporation and would let water be recovered during a drought. She said last summer that Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan lost more water to evaporation — almost 200,000 acre-feet — than the city of Austin consumed.

Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, urged lawmakers to maximize the state's existing water supplies.

He testified that drought contingency plans are drafted locally and filed with the state without the state reviewing "how much water is actually being saved."

He said that causes inconsistencies in how cities — including neighboring communities drawing from the same water supplies — handle restrictions on water use.

"It's (a problem) everywhere," Ritter said. "It's definitely an issue we will be dealing with."

For example, Kramer said, voluntary restrictions on water use were never used in Corpus Christi because the restrictions aren't triggered until the city's reservoir reaches 50 percent of capacity. Kramer suggested that is too low and that weather conditions — not just reservoir levels — should be part of the equation.

"You may well be into a drought before the reservoir reaches the trigger," he said.

Likewise, Kramer said Houston was restricting its residents to twice-a-week watering of their lawns while selling water to neighboring cities that didn't have those limits.

He said water wholesalers, whether public suppliers like Houston or private companies, don't have a financial incentive to restrict water sales.

He suggested a drought surcharge that would encourage conservation while stabilizing a water supplier's revenue. Ritter said the state should be careful how much it mandates to local officials.

"Our water plan is based on local control and local participation," Ritter said. "I believe that's a great mechanism."

He said the state's job is to provide the tools so that local officials can manage their water supplies. He said the intensity of the 2011 drought has made local officials more receptive to change: "It's opened a lot of eyes how devastating a drought can be."

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