

## Nevada drought as 'bad as any seen;' fires, food prices increase amid severe conditions

Sep 09

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### By the numbers

17 Number of counties in Nevada in drought

53 Percent of country in moderate drought or worse

35 Percent of country in severe drought or worse

18 Percent of country in extreme drought or worse

5 Percent of country in exceptional drought

11 Number of 100-degree or hotter days in Reno this summer

77.6 Degrees for average July temperature nationally, warmest month on record

Source: U.S. Drought Monitor, Western Regional Climate Center

### Inside

#### 'MEGA-DROUGHT'

Researchers find evidence of a decades-long drought on the bottom of Fallen Leaf Lake. 10A  
RENO-SPARKS WATER supply

Truckee Meadows remains in good shape, thanks to the winter of 2010-11. 10A  
Here comes El Niño

Outlook is hard to predict. 10A

#### What they said

"I've seen a lot of dry years and a lot of good years. This is one of the driest. As far as water from the Carson River, that's just about nonexistent."

— Carson Valley Rancher Andy Aldax

"I think it's pretty desperate in a lot of places for a lot of people. We're in a dry state in the first place, so moisture is critical. If it doesn't show up, it's a problem. It is by far the worst (drought) I've seen, and it's got to be worse than what most people remember."

— Bruce Peterson,

state conservationist, U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service

"The dry conditions have certainly been a very big problem. It's a very serious problem primarily for (ranchers) on the federal ranges. They are having to bring cattle in and sell some of those cattle off."

— Doug Busselman,

executive vice president, Nevada Farm Bureau

"There just isn't any water here at all. It's really kind of scary. Anybody who has done seeding this year, that seed probably won't make it."

— Carson Valley rancher Barbara Byington

“The vegetation is very, very dry. There really isn’t much forage for livestock or wildlife. It’s a tinderbox for fire. It catches very quickly.”

— Mark Coca,  
vegetation management specialist, U.S. Bureau of Land Management

As a fourth-generation Nevada cattle rancher, David Hussman has seen times wet and dry.

But the drought of 2012 stands out. Never before has he seen the East Fork of the Carson River, which flows past his Gardnerville ranch, as dry as it is now.

He didn’t plant any alfalfa crops this year. There was no water to do so.

“This is as bad as any I’ve ever seen,” said Hussman, 56, of his brown fields brittle with stubble. “You hate to walk across the pasture and hear it go crunch. It’s not good.”

Wildfires are racing across a parched landscape in what stands to be among the most damaging fire seasons in history, putting lives and property at risk.

And Nevadans will be paying more for food because the drought is also hammering the nation’s breadbasket, with corn and soybean crops in the Midwest particularly hard hit.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said folks can expect to pay an additional 3 percent or more for groceries next year, with milk, eggs, beef, poultry and pork prices expected to rise because the drought pushed up feed prices.

“Consumers are definitely going to feel it,” said USDA economist Richard Volpe.

Fortunately, water supplies serving Reno remain plentiful — the result of a big surplus left over from an epic winter in 2010-11.

But that water is going quickly after a strikingly dry past winter was followed by a hot summer that produced one of the longest strings of 100-plus-degree days ever recorded in Reno.

All of Nevada’s 17 counties are suffering drought, with two regions of Northern Nevada — including a huge swath in the west stretching from Douglas County, Carson City and the Reno area north to the Oregon line — considered to be in extreme drought.

More than 53 percent of the country is considered to be in moderate drought or worse, with more than 17 percent considered in extreme drought or worse, according to statistics released in Thursday by the U.S. Drought Monitor. More than 5 percent is in the rare category of “exceptional drought.”

Droughts typically develop over a span of years, but this one came quickly as a dry winter and spring evolved into a sizzling summer, with July 2012 the hottest month on record nationwide dating back to 1895.

It’s the drought equivalent of a flash flood.

“This is a classic example of a flash drought,” said Brad Rippey, a Washington, D.C.-based agricultural meteorologist and co-author of the U.S. Drought Monitor.

“This was a very quick-hitting event. It developed in just a matter of weeks,” Rippey said. “From an agricultural standpoint, it is the most serious drought in 24 years.”

While not on par with some of the massive droughts of the 1930s and 1950s, this year’s event probably rates among the top five nationally, said Kelly Redmond, a climatologist with the Western Regional Climate Center at Reno’s Desert Research Institute.

In Nevada, the winter season was decidedly dry, as evidenced by two rare winter-season wildfires that burned in the Reno area in November and January, destroying roughly 30 homes each.

Close to 60 days — including the entire month of December, normally a significant precipitation month for Reno — passed without any rain or snow falling. A late January storm “accounted for almost everything” when it came to the region’s all-important mountain snowpack, Redmond said.

When the end of the traditional snow season came in early April, only about half the amount of snow that normally falls in the mountains was there.

A dry spring followed and, when summer hit, it hit hard. In Reno, temperatures reached 100 degrees or more on 11 days, a stretch only seen before in 1988 and 1970. Only 1972 recorded more, with 13 days of 100 degrees or higher.

It was that combination of dry and hot that made this year’s drought particularly significant for western Nevada and the Sierra, Redmond said.

“We were behind on precipitation, by quite a bit, and then it was very warm,” Redmond said. “It’s like a cross-cut saw where you are pulling on both ends. This drought is a warm drought and temperature makes a big difference.”

At the Hussman spread about 50 miles south of Reno, where they’re used to some Thanksgiving snow, the worry started when December ended dry.

“We started thinking, ‘OK, this could be bad,’ ” said Hussman, whose family has run the 560-acre ranch since 1872.

After that wet winter of 2010-11, Hussman was able to grow three good crops of alfalfa. He planned on selling the third crop this year, “and at a good price, too,” but as dry conditions dragged on, he had second thoughts.

Now, that third crop of alfalfa will be feeding his cattle over the coming winter.

“That’s what’s getting us through. Otherwise, we’d have to sell some cows” they want to keep as breeding stock, Hussman said.

That’s exactly what a lot of ranchers have already had to do, said J.J. Goicoechea, president of the Nevada Cattlemen’s Association.

Cattle ranching, iconic to Nevada, represents nearly two-thirds of the state’s roughly \$1 billion a year agricultural industry, and the drought has many ranchers taking a serious hit, Goicoechea said.

“This is the worst. It’s never looked like this,” Goicoechea said. “We are in a disaster.”

Even if the next winter is a good one, Goicoechea suspects ranchers will have problems returning cattle to drought-stricken grazing allotments on Nevada's federal land. And with Idaho, Wyoming, the Dakotas and other grazing states facing similar problems, options may be few, he said.

Up to 1.3 million head of mother cows have been sold — most to slaughter — due to drought impacts, and that will have a national impact on the industry, Goicoechea said. Other ranchers are having to buy hay to keep livestock alive at a cost crippling to many.

#### Wildfires add to crisis

Goicoechea and others said the situation is substantially worsened by the massive wildfires burning across much of Nevada's range this summer, a problem also linked to drought conditions. Much of the burned land consists of federal grazing allotments that won't be available again for grazing anytime soon.

"These fires are having a huge double-whammy effect on the ranchers," said Clint Koble, Nevada director of the Farm Service Agency, which offers emergency loans to drought-stricken ranchers and farmers to help with such measures as buying hay and hauling water.

With land all around them charred by fire, many ranchers have nowhere to move their cattle, Koble said. Many have yet to even assess their total loss from the drought, he said.

One of those is John Falen, who runs cattle on U.S. Bureau of Land Management allotments near his ranch outside Orovada, north of Winnemucca. Three big fires have burned Falen's range this summer. One fire alone, the lightning-sparked Long Canyon Fire, burned 25,000 acres in mid-August.

"The fires on top of the drought just compounds the problem," said Falen, 75. "It's a tough year. Personally, I think this is the worst year we've had in 35 years. We don't know where we're going to be when the year ends."

Falen aims to get by, just like during tough times of the past.

The truly scary thought, Falen and others agree, is the very real possibility this drought year could be followed by another. Or another after that.

"I don't want to think about having another dry winter. Then we'd really be in a pickle," Falen said.

"The big question is next year," Hussman agreed, adding that it's the specter of a long-term trend that can keep him up at night.

"If a year like this is going to be typical, there won't be any ranching left in this valley," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.



*Metromix: Burning Man*



*Burning Man Saturday*



*Mug shots*



*Burning Man Friday*