

Drought Overview: Drought developed across the South during the summer of 1998. More recently, drought has severely stressed dryland agriculture and reduced irrigation reserves in the western half of the U.S. Current impacts across the country rival some of the most formidable droughts of the last century. According to the National Climatic Data Center, more than one-third (about 36 percent) of the contiguous U.S. was in severe to extreme drought, based on the Palmer Drought Index, at the end of June 2002. This is comparable to the size and duration of the drought that peaked across the U.S. during the summer of 1988, but only the Dust Bowl 1930's and the Drought of the 1950's stand out as more significant, national-scale droughts since the beginning of the 20th century.

Ironically, the Midwest—hit hard in 1988 by the last large-scale U.S. drought—has been the only region spared from the current drought's devastating effects. Drought has flirted with the Midwest at times, shifting westward across the Corn Belt during the 1999-2000 cold season and more recently stressing pastures and summer crops in the western Corn Belt. In the last few days, short-term dryness has also become a concern in the eastern Corn Belt. But not since the “flash drought” (a term describing extreme but short-term heat and dryness) of July– August 1995 has Midwestern corn and soybean production been regionally reduced by adverse conditions.

Areas from the High Plains westward have not fared as well, as drought-stricken rangelands have helped to pull national range/pasture conditions to their lowest levels for this time of year since USDA began keeping this type of statistic in 1995. In fact, national range/pasture conditions fell below the period-of-record average in August 1999 and have yet to return to that level since. The southern Atlantic region, excluding southern Florida, has been the other part of the country hit extremely hard by drought, with some locations missing out on the equivalent of a year's worth of rainfall during the last four years.

Farther north, the drought has been more transient in the Mid-Atlantic region and adjacent areas, peaking in 1998–99 and again from late 2001 into early 2002. Meanwhile, Maine was especially hard hit by dryness in 2001, noting its driest year on record. Several other parts of the country have experienced chronic drought in recent years, including the lower Rio Grande Valley (drier than normal in most years since the early 1990's) and the northern High Plains (unusually dry since the late 1990s). Elsewhere, Wyoming has the dubious distinction of being involved in both the Northwestern drought of 2000– 01 and the Southwestern/High Plains drought of 2001– 02.

The bottom line for the current (1998–?) drought, as with most major U.S. dry spells, is that shifting weather patterns have allowed the drought to remain transient, nimbly shifting from one place to another but seemingly favoring certain unfortunate regions. In addition, some parts of the U.S. continue to struggle with a transformation of the drought-impacts picture due to factors such as urbanization and changes in vegetation and water consumption.

Brad Rippey, U.S. Department of Agriculture
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