

Drought lifts a little, but state still thirsty

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Arkansas is seeing some improvement in the drought for the first time since May, when dry conditions began intensifying.

The U.S. Drought Mitigation Center reported Thursday that 45 percent of Arkansas is in an exceptional drought. Last week, the agency said 53 percent of the state was in an exceptional drought.

The center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln classifies exceptional drought conditions as a deficiency of at least 9 inches of rain over what's normal during a 30-day period.

According to the center, 74 percent of the state is in extreme drought or worse, meaning a deficiency of at least 4 inches of rain during a 30-day period. That's down from 81 percent last week, the center said.

Lower temperatures and spotty rainfall in some areas of the state are credited for the improvement.

But forecasters are quick to urge Arkansans not to get too optimistic that the drought may soon be over.

Long-range forecasts call for dry conditions that will continue fueling the drought, said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist with the U.S. Drought Mitigation Center.

"A little bit of improvement is better than nothing," he said.

"But there is still the underlying dryness in the area. It's going to require a lot of cool temperatures and sustained rains before it gets much better.

"But we've got to start somewhere," Svoboda said.

National Weather Service meteorologists in North Little Rock are watching Tropical Storm Isaac in the southern Atlantic Ocean this week to see if it develops into a hurricane and heads toward the Gulf Coast.

It's projected to hit Florida on Monday. If it heads farther west, it could affect rainfall in Arkansas, said meteorologist John Lewis .

"If it makes a significant turn toward the west — and that's the trend so far — it could come closer to Texas and bring rain," Lewis said.

That rain would be welcomed by farmers, who have lacked hay and water to feed stock animals, and by those who use the state's rivers and lakes for transporting goods and for recreation.

"It's a challenge, but barges are still moving," said Terry Ferebee, manager of the Helena Marine Service, a Phillips County barge company along the Mississippi River.

"It's extremely low," he said. "We've got some grain elevators that can't get the product out. There's no water to get in there."

In May 2011, the river reached record highs during flooding. At one point, the Mississippi River spanned 3 miles across at Helena-West Helena.

“It’s 55 feet lower now than that last flood,” Ferebee said.

River levels are measured by a standard point of elevation. The Mississippi River at Helena-West Helena measured at -3.4 feet Thursday afternoon. It’s forecast to reach -3.9 feet by Tuesday. The record low for the river is -4.2 feet set on July 11, 1988.

Barge traffic on the Mississippi River has been mandated to carry lighter loads to avoid grounding in the shallow river. On Monday, the U.S. Coast Guard even briefly closed an 11-mile section of the river near Greenville, Miss., when a towboat grounded.

“We sit here and watch the barges,” said Alisa Bradley, manager of the Mississippi River Museum at Mud Island Park in Memphis. “Usually, the river is like a six-lane highway with barges passing each other. Now, it’s like a one-lane country road.”

She said the low-water conditions haven’t hampered visitors to the museum and she’s able to incorporate the conditions into presentations.

“I tell them when they look at the low river that they’re seeing a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” Bradley said.

Traffic on the Arkansas River hasn’t been slowed by the drought because the river system’s lock and dams control the river’s levels.

“They are designed to hold the pool to allow barge traffic in droughts,” said Laurie Driver, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman. “The locks and dams have proved their worth. They’re made to ensure we have 9-foot deep channels for traffic.”

On Thursday, traffic at Montgomery Point at the southern end of the Arkansas River near the Mississippi River was stopped as workers repaired a hinge pin at one of the locks. Driver said Thursday afternoon that the river would be opened there either late Thursday evening or today.

Workers will also close the lock and dam at Dardanelle from Monday to Sept. 3 as they perform scheduled maintenance and inspections.

State parks’ swimming areas and campsites have also remained open despite the drought, said Greg Butts, state parks director.

“Adjustments have been made at some parks, but we’re open,” Butts said.

Some park officials have had to move docks and swimming beaches closer to the lakes to accommodate the lower water levels, he said.

State parks saw an 11 percent increase in campsite usage and a 10 percent increase in cabin rentals during the first six months of this year compared with last year, Butts said. In July, visitation was “flat,” he said, because of high temperatures.

“The heat kept them away,” he said.

Driver said officials at the Corps’ lakes also moved beaches and docks because of receding shorelines, but none is closed.

She said the lakes maintain conservation pools to ensure enough water remains during drought conditions. Corps lakes are designed to withstand two years of drought, she said.

But Driver urged boating enthusiasts to watch more closely as they go through shallow areas and use depth finders to ensure they don’t collide with sandbars or submerged stumps or other debris.

She also said swimmers shouldn’t jump from bluffs into water because they could hit objects just under the water’s surface.

Forecasters call for a 30 percent to 40 percent chance of showers this weekend. Temperatures will remain in the 90s, Lewis said.

“We’re not going to see any widespread changes anytime soon, unless Isaac brings rain,” he said. “We’re in a typical pattern for August in Arkansas.”



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A towboat with eight loaded barges heads down the Arkansas River past another towboat tying onto barges Thursday near the Port of Little Rock. The drought hasn’t hampered Arkansas River traffic as it has on the Mississippi River, a section of which temporarily closed earlier this week.



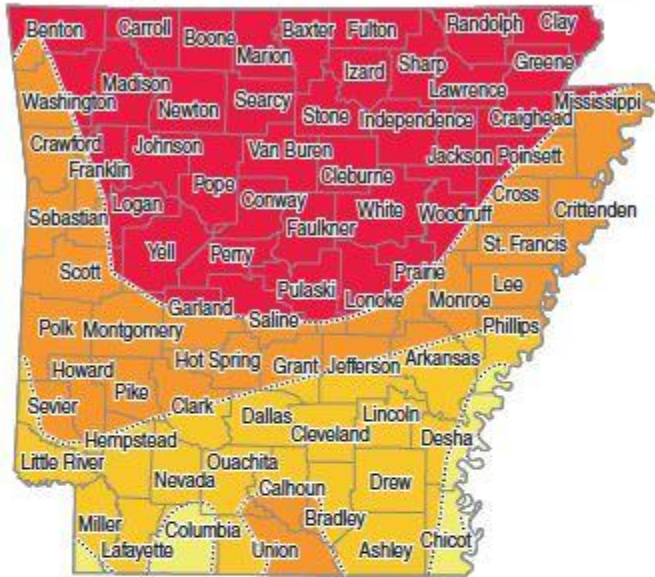
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A towboat with eight loaded barges travels along the Arkansas River past the Port of Little Rock

on Thursday. Chad Pryor, dock superintendent, was painting a caution line.



Drought in Arkansas AS OF TUESDAY



<p>Abnormally dry Going into drought: short-term dryness slowing planting, growth of crops or pastures. Coming out of drought: some lingering water deficits; pastures or crops not fully recovered</p>	<p>Severe drought Crop or pasture losses likely; water shortages common; water restrictions imposed</p>
<p>Moderate drought Some damage to crops, pastures; streams, reservoirs, or wells low, some water shortages developing or imminent; voluntary water-use restrictions requested</p>	<p>Extreme drought Major crop/pasture losses; widespread water shortages or restrictions</p>
	<p>Exceptional drought Exceptional and widespread crop/pasture losses; shortages of water in reservoirs, streams, and wells creating water emergencies</p>

SOURCE: National Drought Mitigation Center

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