

Drought Pattern Dominates HARVEST

No relief in sight for central U.S. while most other regions will see near normal fall weather. **BY BRYCE ANDERSON**



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What a season the 2012 crop year turned into. A season that began with bright hopes for good production, which were bolstered by rapid planting progress, instead turned into a nightmare of disastrously hot and dry conditions. The Drought of 2012 has carved itself a huge niche in history—alongside the droughts of 1988, the mid-1950s and the mid-1930s.

The scope of this drought is mind-boggling. Some 80% of the contiguous U.S. had some form of drought by midsummer. This was a stunning reversal of fortune from just a few months earlier, when it appeared crop sizes would be large, possibly at record levels. But then came the drought. The origins of the 2012 calamity are varied. They include a resilient La Niña Pacific Ocean pattern (La Niña events favor drought); a very mild winter that left little snowpack to help keep soils moist in the spring; and a general longer-term warming trend, which featured well above-normal temperatures across the entire U.S. east of the Rockies going back to springtime 2011.

Massive heat waves brought blistering heat during March, June and July, turbo-charging the process of evaporating water out of soils and plants, and leading

to what meteorologists call a “flash drought.” Rather than develop gradually, as is more typical with drought conditions, this drought came on with stunning swiftness. **LITTLE RELIEF.** How does that play out for the fall season? For starters, almost the entire weather and climate community expects dry and warm conditions to linger through harvest; few areas of the contiguous U.S. are in line for above-normal precipitation. Those areas with the good fortune to exceed average precipitation are the southwestern U.S. along with the central Gulf Coast. For the central U.S., widespread above-normal temperatures and below-normal precipitation are forecast.

What about El Niño? The simple answer: Its prognosis is indefinite. It’s questionable whether there will be much, if any, jet stream benefit from the development of El Niño in the Pacific Ocean. El Niño conditions are in effect when the equatorial ocean waters between South America and the international date line are warmer than average. The consensus of weather forecast models is that we will see a weak to moderate El Niño form this fall.

However, rainfall patterns associated with El Niño are usually confined to the southern tier of states. Probabilities with an El Niño winter are highest for a dry season from the northern Plains through the central Midwest. In other

words, it's possible for the hardest-hit drought areas to finish out the year in a continued drought stage.

Following are regional outlooks.

▶ **MIDWEST.** Temperatures above normal with precipitation below normal. Harvest of drought-affected crops appears to have few interruptions from wet conditions. However, the drier pattern also will be concerning regarding soil moisture for planting winter wheat as well as for thinking about row-crop planting next season.

▶ **NORTHERN PLAINS.** Near-normal temperatures and precipitation. The northern growing areas have generally fared better than the central part of the country this season.

▶ **SOUTHERN PLAINS.** Temperatures and precipitation both near normal. If El Niño exerts a stronger influence on the weather patterns, we could see some moisture work its way into the region during the latter part of the fall season. However, dry conditions will be a definite concern for wheat planting early in the season.

▶ **DELTA AND SOUTHEAST.** There is a good chance for above-normal precipitation in the southern Delta and the immediate Gulf Coast portions of the region. Elsewhere, we'll see near-normal temperatures and precipitation.

Tropical storm activity did not start out very strong; of course, it only takes one hard-hitting storm to cause a season's worth of damage.

▶ **MID-ATLANTIC AND NORTHEAST.** Near-normal temperatures and precipitation will allow for some easing of stressful conditions that developed during the hot and dry periods this past spring and summer. There will be some drier trends to develop, however, in the Allegheny Plateau of Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

▶ **WEST.** Some above-normal precipitation is likely in southern California, Utah, western Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico, with some improvement in drought conditions. Otherwise, generally near-normal temperatures and precipitation will allow drought areas in the northern Rockies and Great Basin to continue. Fortunately, no developing dryness is likely in the Pacific Northwest. ●



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