

# No recharge is bad news

By TOM J. BECHMAN

**M**OST major droughts in the Corn Belt start in the fall," says Jim Newman flatly. "If you don't get recharge down deep in the fall, you're not likely to get enough precipitation in the winter months, particularly in prairie areas, to catch up.

"The thing about fall recharge is that moisture can percolate down and get to the depths under the soil. The hybrids we have today that are more drought-tolerant have roots that can go down that far to get it. But if we don't get soil moisture recharge, then we start into next season short.

"The problem with spring rains, even if they are plentiful, is that we get runoff and evaporation, and it's tougher to recharge the subsoil than in the fall."

Newman is a retired climatologist from the Purdue University Department of Agronomy. One of the things he studied closely was long-term weather events and moisture cycles in the Corn Belt.

## Drought concerns

Dev Niyogi, current Indiana state climatologist based at Purdue, agrees the drought is already se-

### Key Points

- Now is the best time to recharge subsoil moisture.
- Forecasts call for below-normal winter precipitation.
- Snow is not effective at recharging subsoils.

rious in some areas — southern Indiana, for example. He will watch northern areas, including Michigan and Wisconsin, this winter to see if drought develops and creeps down into northern Indiana and becomes more severe there, as well.

Both climatologists point out that even if the Corn Belt sees a reasonable amount of snow, it doesn't amount to much help from a precipitation standpoint. "It takes 10 to 12 inches of snow to get an inch of precipitation," Niyogi says. "That won't help on recharge."

Newman agrees. Besides, some of the snow is lost to evaporation and never makes it into the soil in the first place. That's another reason why snowfall is not the answer to recharge. It needs to happen in late fall if it's going to be effective and set up for a good crop in 2011, Newman says.

Unfortunately, that's not what Niyogi sees happening. Long-term forecasts and the presence of La Niña indicate that precipitation likely will be below normal through the winter. The National Weather Service takes a different view, predicting above-normal precipitation this winter. At any rate, winter precipitation often doesn't help recharge very much.

If the La Niña ends, although it's difficult to predict when that will happen, significant rainfall could arrive in March and April.

## No relief

"The other factor contributing to this drought is the lack of hurricanes coming ashore during the tropical hurricane season," Niyogi says. "There were more tropical storms than normal, as predicted, but most went into the ocean. We didn't get relief from a tropical storm reaching land as we have in the past."

While it's too early to tell with any accuracy, Niyogi says drought risk is likely up for 2011. Part of it will depend on how the accuracy of his forecast plays out through late fall and winter. Poor fall subsoil recharge would be a strike against the 2011 growing season before it ever arrives.

### Drought Intensity



SOURCE: MARK BOGHOSON, NATIONAL DROUGHT MITIGATION CENTER



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