

Droughts worse centuries ago

Drought conditions actually have moderated compared to past times. Scientists at the University of Minnesota have studied long-term climate changes over the past 2,300 years by studying layered sediments. Droughts worse than the 1930s Dust Bowl were common before AD 1200.

The most pronounced drought periods were AD 200-370, AD 700-850 and AD 1000-1200. Drought conditions in past centuries have per-

sisted longer in the Great Plains region than in other areas of the country.

It is due to the region's continental location, where differing air masses tend to collide, such as warm dry air from the Pacific, cold dry air from the Arctic and moist tropical air from the Gulf of Mexico.

Will long-term droughts reoccur? Perhaps. But governments and organizations will have advance notice and better information available to help counter drought effects, thanks to the National Drought Mitigation Center.

Scientists warn of droughts

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consecutive drought years from the late 1980s through the early 1990s, but it seldom made the national headlines because droughts are 'non-structural,' compared to earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, etc."

The NDMC was established

in 1995, with support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Now, the center is partnering with USDA and NOAA's Climate Prediction Center to track developing drought conditions anywhere in the country. The most visible result is the weekly Drought Monitor, which was unveiled at the White House in Washington last July and is available to anyone via the Internet.

The map provides an up-to-date summary of current drought areas across the 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Pacific possessions. It incorporates information from many sources at state, regional and national levels. Besides current conditions, it provides an outlook on where drought is likely to develop or worsen in the months ahead. The Drought Monitor classifies drought by severity levels.

"It's designed to provide a 'big picture,' so the general public, media, government officials and others can see what is happening around the country," Wilhite said. The map, updated weekly, is not designed to depict local conditions or replace drought warnings and watches issued by local or regional government entities, he said. "Local situations can be better interpreted by officials in the area."

"What it is designed to do is highlight emerging trouble spots to help state and federal agencies address potential problems earlier," he added. "The idea is to enable agencies to coordinate planning and response efforts so they can implement mitigation programs to lessen drought impacts."

Wilhite said there is no universal drought definition, so the NDMC uses several indices to compile the Drought Monitor map, which shows where drought is emerging and where it is lingering across the United States. The monitor also shows how drought is affecting agriculture, wildfire danger and water supplies.

"It's designed for drought and water planners and policy-makers," said Wilhite. "But many people find the information interesting. And, it's as easy to understand as the Weather Channel's travel advisory service."

The Drought Monitor and drought index maps can be accessed on the World Wide Web at <http://enso.unl.edu/monitor> or <http://enso.unl.edu/monitor>.



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