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DROUGHT GRIP LOOSENS

By Monroe S. Miller

One might have guessed, way back on April 26, that we were going to have some kind of abnormal year in 1988. On that Wednesday, on the way to work, the Madison radio stations were playing Christmas music. We woke up to snow blowing across the streets and across the golf courses. The world was white. All of the golf courses in the city were closed for the day. Some residents even made jokes about heading back to Florida for another month. Yet by Sunday, the temperature reached a high of 82°! Those few days of extremes should have given evidence to a bad weather moon on the rise for 1988.

Many golf courses opened their 1988 season early again, continuing a trend of recent years of a late March start in much of Wisconsin. Few paid attention to the lack of rainfall early in the season, except to remark how great it was to be able to get so much work done ahead of schedule. By Mother's Day, irrigation systems had put out a lot of water for that time of year and we were to learn later that the rain that fell over much of the state that weekend would be the last for quite a while.

As reports from weather stations for May started coming together early in June, the severity of the problem became more clear. The statistics compiled by state climatologist Douglas Clark emphasized what Wisconsin's Golf Course Superintendents already knew — we were on our way to near record drought in some areas of the state. The May average for all of Wisconsin was 1.36", only 38% of the normal 3.55". This statewide average was

the third lowest on record and the lowest since 1925.

Mid-June was the time the whole world seemed to become aware of the seriousness of the drought. Every night on the television news and every day in the newspapers there were stories about the weather. We learned also that we had lots of company; it was dry from Montana to Nashville and getting worse in nearly all locations. Theories started to appear about the causes — sun spot activity, the "creeping phenomenon", volcanoes, the jet stream, El Nino and moving averages. Despite the causes, the forecasts that were to become all too familiar started to appear: no relief in sight.

Golf courses were suffering, but no worse than were farms. Most of them do not have our advantage of irrigation and were strictly at the mercy of Mother Nature. People began to wonder about the economic effects of the lack of rainfall. A burning ban went into effect. On June 17 in Madison, the drought of 1988 was officially recorded the "worst ever" up to that date. The city went 35 consecutive days without precipitation, breaking a record set in the winter of 1939-1940. Many older people thought of the summers from 1934 through 1936 and compared this one to those. It really was getting bad all across Wisconsin, and throughout the nation as well.

The press focused more and more on the drought and its consequences as June dragged on. We read of the lack of mosquitos and the abundance of ladybugs. Leaf miners and grasshoppers became more prevalent. Pic-

tures of stranded barges on the Mississippi River drew attention to low water levels and brought suggestions of diverting Lake Michigan water. Our governor expressed his vehement opposition in no uncertain terms and along with other Great Lakes leaders was able to put that irresponsible notion to rest.

In our town, as the 40th day without rain passed, the Climate Analysis Center issued drought advisories. The USDA started planning for emergency relief and forecasters predicted more of the same kind of weather. Features appeared under the new heading of "The Drought of '88" and it somehow became more official. The lack of moisture was exacerbated by the extremely high temperatures day after day.

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