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Weatherlink

FALL MOISTURE RECHARGE?

BRYCE ANDERSON

There is no doubt drought topped all conversation about the now-ending crop season. But now, with harvest drawing to a close, talk turns to next year. Will we go into 2013 dry, as well? When will this dryness actually let up? How will cropping practices like corn on corn perform if the moisture situation doesn't get better?

There is some debate as to when the Drought of 2012 actually started. Central and eastern Midwest areas have an approximate date of June 1; northwestern Midwest areas in August 2011; and the Southern Plains, Delta and Southeast can point to well over a year ago.

How does this drought compare with another hallmark event 24 years ago? We've actually had a larger drought this year. The area of the continental U.S. affected by drought at its late-summer peak exceeded the 1988 drought. In fact, the 2012 drought more closely rivals one 60 years ago, in the early 1950s.

Producers reacted to this year's drought with practices reflecting the ahead-of-schedule drying of crops. The onset of harvest in late summer is the most obvious indication of this revised schedule.

There is no doubt we've seen some late-summer improvement in soil moisture. We saw a week's worth of moderate to heavy rain in the southern Plains, as well as tropical system–induced heavy rainfall in the southeastern Midwest and Delta during late summer. And, as the fall season develops, the chance for additional moisture from El Niño upper-level air currents is possible. The most likely areas to benefit from El Niño–related rainfall are the southwestern U.S., south Texas, the Gulf Coast, the eastern Midwest, the southern Delta and the Southeast.

One indicator that is easy to track is the weekly Drought Monitor. As we go deeper into the fall season toward the Thanksgiving holiday, I'll be looking for two stages of improvement in drought as a sign that our farming areas may be able to go into next spring with a chance at manageable soil moisture. For instance, if areas with Stage 4 or Exceptional Drought can improve to Stage 2 or Severe Drought, that would be a real accomplishment. It's going to be a challenge, however, because precipitation needed to bring soil moisture levels to a near-normal category across the central U.S. is 10 to 15 inches. As a rule, we don't get that kind of precipitation during the fall. But even the start of drought improvement will be significant in preparing and planning for next year's crop season.

READ BRYCE'S WEATHER BLOG AT
ABOUT.DTNPF.COM/WEATHER
bryce.anderson@telventdtn.com
402-399-6419

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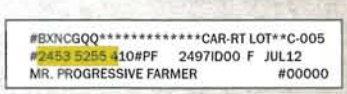

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