

Debilitating drought to continue in South

By Doyle Rice
USA TODAY

The disastrous southern drought, which led to \$10 billion in crop and agricultural losses in 2011, is forecast to continue through at least three months, government scientists report.

The drought is also forecast to worsen and expand across the water-sensitive western USA. However, a powerful winter storm, after dumping snow in the Northwest, is forecast to bring some relief to the snow-starved Sierra Nevada in California this week.

According to the most recent Drought Monitor, a weekly federal government report, drought is either in place or forecast to develop in a solid 2,500-mile stripe across the southern tier of the USA from California to Virginia.

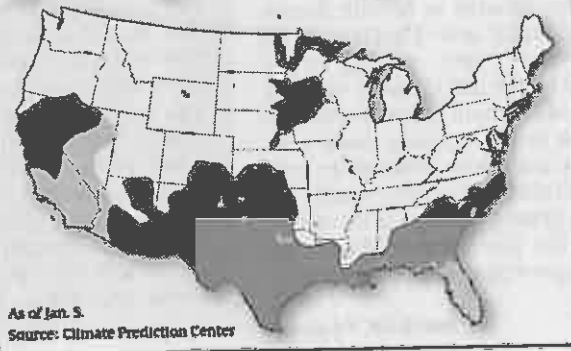
"There are fairly good odds that the winter will continue to be on the warm and dry side in the southern U.S.," says climatologist Brian Fuchs of the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb.

The climate pattern La Niña, a cooling of Pacific Ocean water that usually leads to dry weather across the southern USA, remains in place, according to Fuchs. He says that even though this La Niña is not as strong as last winter's, its effects should continue to be felt

Drought outlook

Drought is either forecast to persist or develop across the southern tier of the USA over the next three months.

□ No drought ▨ Development likely ■ Persist or intensify



By Doyle Rice and Janet Loebrke, USA TODAY

all the way from Southern California to Florida and the southeast coast into the spring.

Although late fall and early winter rain has helped in bone-dry Texas, it has "by no means ended their drought," Fuchs says. Indeed, 95% of Texas is in some level of drought, according to the most recent Drought Monitor. This is the highest percentage of any state.

Record-low snowfall this winter is raising concern about water across much of the West, particularly in California, where almost half of the state is enduring drought. This is

the state's highest percentage of drought since March 2009.

Snow surveyors from the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) reported this month that the state's mountain snowpack was among the driest for the date on record. As of last week, the snowpack's statewide water content was 11% of average. Mountain snow that melts into reservoirs, streams and aquifers in the spring and summer provides approximately one-third of the water for California's households, farms and industries, the DWR reports.

Despite the dry conditions, water managers remain cautiously optimistic about this year's water supply.

"Fortunately, we have most of winter ahead of us, and our reservoir storage is good," DWR Director Mark Cowin says.

The dryness could lead to a severe wildfire season this year in California, according to Cal Fire, the state's department of forestry and fire protection. In many areas, Cal Fire has banned debris burning.

There is some short-term relief in sight for the Sierra from a wintry storm forecast this week: "They'll be measuring the snow in feet throughout the Sierra late this week and over the weekend," Weather Channel meteorologist Mark Ressler says.