

Change in seasons does not bring end to drought

By John Eligon, New York Times

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Even as the summer swelter has given way to frost, nearly two-thirds of the country remains in a drought, with forest fires still burning, winter crops choking in parched soil and barges nearly scraping the mucky bottoms of sunken rivers.

More than 62 percent of the continental United States is experiencing moderate to exceptional drought, according to the weekly Drought Monitor report released on Thursday, compared with just over 29 percent at this time last year.

Save for patches of California, Montana and Wyoming, the drought is expected to persist in most of the dry regions west of the Mississippi River over the next three months, according to the Seasonal Drought Outlook released Thursday by the National Weather Service.

“It’s not looking very promising right now,” said David Miskus, a meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s climate prediction center.

This is typically the driest time of the year, Mr. Miskus said, so precipitation will have to be far above normal levels to put a dent in regions that have been rain starved since the spring.

With the Great Plains – from southern South Dakota to the Texas Panhandle – enduring the most desiccated conditions, the agricultural sector is bracing for the hardest blow. Most of the Plains and the Mississippi River Valley had less than a quarter-inch of rain over the past week, according to the Drought Monitor.

The drought expanded across parts of Southeast Texas through central Louisiana in areas that had precipitation shortfalls of 8 to 14 inches over the past three months, the report said.

Just over a quarter of the nation's wheat crop, planted mostly in September and October, was in poor or very poor condition, according to a report released last week by the United States Department of Agriculture. Those are the worst conditions since the department began keeping records in 1986, said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the department.

In Nebraska, where most of the state has been in an exceptional drought, farmers have reported planting their wheat in dry soil with the hope that rain or snow will eventually come and germinate the seeds and allow them to sprout, said Caroline Brauer, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Wheat Board.

But for now, in some dehydrated fields, thin, green whiskers resembling grassy patches poke from the dusty ground, rather than the thick, wavy plants that typically sprout from a healthy wheat field.

The wheat harvest is not until next summer, so there is still time for it to bounce back. But a dry winter would make adequate precipitation in March and April that much more essential for the crop. And snow is also important to help insulate the wheat from extreme cold and wind during the winter.

Corn and soybean farmers are eager for precipitation to prepare the soil for their plantings in April.

"We know we got time ahead of us," said Dennis McNinch, a corn and wheat farmer in west-central Kansas. But, he added: "Every day is a day closer to needing more moisture. That time will come that we're going to have to get the tractors rolling and putting seed in the ground. We'll just keep praying that next storm's on its way."

Perhaps the most unusual sign of the nagging drought is the 3,700-acre wildfire raging in the Rocky Mountains in northern Colorado.

The fire in Estes Park, which started in October from an illegal campfire, is burning at altitudes of 8,000 to 10,000 feet, on peaks that should be covered in snow right now.

The fire more than doubled in size on Saturday morning after 70 mile-per-hour winds swept through the area, forcing the evacuation of about 600 residences nearby, said Don Ferguson, a spokesman for the National Park Service.

The lack of moisture is also taxing water systems throughout the country, most notably the Mississippi River.

"If we continue to get or stay below normal for rainfall, and if the level continues to drop, we could even get close to or surpass the record low level on the river," said Jim Kramper, a warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service.

This could spell trouble for barges that transport billions of dollars in agricultural products, chemicals, coal and petroleum products. The industry estimates that water levels could bring navigation closings between St. Louis and Cairo, Ill., before the end of December.

Debra Colbert, a spokeswoman for the Waterways Council, a group that lobbies on behalf of inland carriers, operators and ports, said, "We are headed for our own fiscal waterfall here."

Steven Yaccino contributed reporting from Chicago and John Schwartz from New York.