Research could help predict ‘flash droughts’

By Mallory Pickett, Forbes

Debasish PaiMazumder moved to Boulder, Colo., in the winter of 2012 to work as a climate scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. PaiMazumder had spent the past three years in snowy Montreal, so he was pleasantly surprised to find winter in Boulder dry and warm. He was out hiking in shorts and a T-shirt in February, with no snow in sight.

But locals were quick to inform him that this was not a typical Boulder winter. Months later, this strange winter was followed by more exceptional weather: the “flash drought” of 2012-13 that started over the Rockies and went on to devastate agriculture in the Midwest, causing $30 billion in damage. It was one of the costliest natural disasters in recent history, and no one saw it coming.

The sudden onset and relatively short duration made the 2012-2013 dry spell a “flash drought.” Currently, scientists have no good way to predict these kinds of droughts, which can be devastating to farmers.

But in a paper published in Journal of Geophysical Research-Atmospheres this week, PaiMazumder reported a new method that could significantly increase forecasters ability to predict flash droughts. His idea was partly inspired by his warm, snow-free hikes in the winter of 2012.

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