Drought costs in '11 exceed $10B so far

By Doyle Rice
USA TODAY

The nation's costliest natural disaster of the year — the drought across the South that has already cost the USA $10 billion — appears to be expanding its reach.

The dry conditions have spread now into parts of the Southeast and Midwest, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, a federal website that tracks drought across the country.

More than 33% of the USA (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) is now in a drought. That's the nation's highest percentage in almost four years. "This is the most drought for the contiguous U.S. since Jan. 22, 2008," reports Brian Fuchs, a climatologist at the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb.

Fuchs says drought now extends all the way from western Arizona to central North Carolina, a distance of more than 2,000 miles. From north to south in the central USA, the drought reaches from southern Minnesota to South Texas.

Fuchs says some slight improvement has occurred in the past few weeks in Texas and Oklahoma because of recent rainfall, but little relief is in sight for the winter.

"In a broad area across the Southeast and along the southern tier of states, drought is forecast to persist and expand" over the next three months, the Climate Prediction Center announced last week.

The expected southern dryness is due mainly to the La Niña climate pattern, a periodic cooling of central Pacific Ocean water. During La Niña winters, the jet streams tend to push storms over the northern U.S. and away from the South.



By Janet Loehrke, USA TODAY

On Thursday, the climate center reported that "a majority of the models now predict La Niña to continue through the Northern Hemisphere winter."

Even with all the weather catastrophes the USA has endured this year, including blizzards, floods, tornadoes and hurricanes, the drought has been by far the costliest: So far in 2011, the National Climatic Data Center reports that the "total direct losses to agriculture, cattle and structures are over $10 billion; both direct and total economic losses will rise as the event continues."

Pecans, for example, might be more expensive this Thanksgiving because of the drought, which has hurt the Southern crop: "I've been farming for 60 or more years, and this is the driest I've ever seen," said Ben Littlepage, a pecan grower in the central Louisiana town of Colfax. "The bayous are completely dry."

In Atlanta, rainfall is about 10 inches below average this year, Weather Channel meteorologist Tom Moore says.

He says Lake Lanier, the reservoir that supplies water to Atlanta, has dropped by 12 feet since May.

"If we get another dry winter, we'll be in trouble with that lake next year," Moore says.

Contributing: The Associated Press