

Drought in USA hits a record low while rain reigns

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Drought in the U.S. fell to a record low this week: Just 6.1% of the 48 contiguous states is currently experiencing such dry conditions, federal officials said Thursday.

That's the lowest percentage in the 17-year history of the weekly U.S. Drought Monitor report. The previous record low occurred in July 2010, when 7.7% of the contiguous U.S. was in a drought.

"Drought has certainly been disappearing at a rapid rate this spring," said meteorologist Brad Rippey of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The five-year drought in California is practically over, with only about 8% of the state currently in drought.

The strong El Niño of 2015-16 may have caused the initial decrease last year, Rippey said. "El Niño is historically a 'drought-breaker,' while La Niña is a 'drought-maker.'"

A persistent low-pressure area sitting along the west coast of North America this year helped fuel the ongoing wet weather, USDA meteorologist Eric Luebben said. Low pressure causes air to rise, which allows clouds and precipitation to form. Those storms and wet weather then typically meander east-northeast across the central U.S., he said.

The current record low is in sharp contrast to September 2012 when drought reached a record high — 65.5% — in the U.S.

Prior to the weekly Drought Monitor, the monthly Palmer Drought Severity Index was the primary method for measuring drought in the U.S., according to Rippey. As recently as June 1993, there was no drought in the continental U.S., that index reported.