Europe prays for Easter rain in worst drought for a century

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A field of flowers is irrigated during an ongoing drought in Julianadorp. The Dutch have banned barbecues, camp fires and outdoor smoking this Easter, while the Swiss are forecasting potentially the worst drought in Europe for more than a century.

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Either way, prayers in Europe this Easter holiday weekend are as likely

to call for rain as anything else -- with serious fears over the wheat harvest, its impact on already sky-high global food prices and, of course, devastating brush fires.

A year ago, it was Russia that bore the brunt of global warming, and with the price of benchmark wheat futures jumping by more than a fifth since the spring in the global market hub of Chicago, farmers everywhere are busy scanning the skies for soothing signs.

Traditional Easter fairs in the east and the north of the Netherlands have been cancelled because of the risk of fires posed by the extraordinarily dry weather affecting northern Europe, Dutch news agency ANP said.

In the eastern half of the country, one of Europe's biggest traders, outdoor family barbecues, smoking and camp fires are a strict no-no.

In the Swiss canton of Zurich, officials began moving trout this week from the river Toess before their habitat dried up.

A farmer works on a field in his tractor on April 21, in the French village of

Moriat. Six out of 10 French reservoirs are holding water levels far below what is normal, meaning similar irrigation controls are likely there.

This year threatens to bring "one of the most significant droughts since 1864," the year when records began in Switzerland, said Olivier Duding, a climatologist from Swiss weather service Meteosuisse.

The drought in western Switzerland over the last 12 months is as severe as those recorded in 1884 and 1921, Meteosuisse said.

Several cantons have also imposed bans on lighting fire in and close to forests.

Urs Vogt, who manages an association which champions keeping calves with their mothers after birth, warned that once the cows have fed on this spring's first greens, there may be little left for coming months.

A grass shortage could also lead to a fodder shortfall for next winter.

A farmer presents earth of a beet field hit by drought on April 21, in the French northern village of Saint-Omer. Traditional Easter fairs in the east and the north of the Netherlands have been cancelled because of the risk of fires posed by the extraordinarily dry weather affecting northern Europe, Dutch news agency ANP said.

While the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic states of northeastern Europe are not reporting drought, the British Met Office warns it has been "incredibly dry in many parts in March and April."

Rainfall is at 40 percent of normal levels, and England and Wales had the driest March in more than a century. Beware the ides, as they say.

Soon, if the hot, dry spell continues, water use restrictions will be forced on residents and companies there.

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March was already extremely volatile for grains, largely due to growing economic uncertainties and the turmoil in North Africa and parts of the Near East -- as well as the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the Food and Agriculture Organization said after logging a first, slight drop in raw food prices for eight months.

Prices hit record highs at the beginning of the year, and while the main focus for specialist traders is in the United States, a deteriorating drought in Europe could yet spark deep concern.

While European Commission agriculture spokesman Roger Waite acknowledges a "slight" rise in the prices of maize and wheat, he maintained that winter crops remain "generally in good condition."

A spokeswoman for European farmers federation Copa-Cogeca said it was too soon to draw conclusions, but Belgian farmer Guy Franck, who heads a dairy collective in French-speaking Wallonia, says gut instinct tells him worse is yet to come.

"I've been in this game for 30 years, I've never seen a month of April like this one," he said.

"Everything with short roots is seriously dehydrated," he warned.

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