

In Texas, drought means conserving every last drop

July 26 2009, By JOHN McFARLAND , Associated Press Writer



A flat-bed trailer is parked on the closed boat ramp of a Lake Travis marina Friday, July 24, 2009, near the Village of Briarcliff, Texas. Lake Travis is about 31-feet below average level for July. The lake was nearly this low in 1984. Cities across Texas are urging residents to cut way back on water usage, especially in areas hit hardest by drought conditions. (AP Photo/Harry Cabluck)

(AP) -- Off-duty police officers are patrolling streets, looking for people illegally watering their lawns and gardens. Residents are encouraged to stealthily rat out water scofflaws on a 24-hour hot line. One Texas lake has dipped so low that stolen cars dumped years ago are peeking up through the waterline.

The nation's most drought-stricken state is deep-frying under relentless 100-degree days and waterways are drying up, especially in the hardest-hit area covering about 350 miles across south-central [Texas](#). That's

making folks worried about the water supply - and how long it might last.

"The water table's fallin' and fallin' and fallin,' like a whole lot of other people around here," said Wendell McLeod, general manager of Liberty Hill Water Supply Corp. and a 60-year resident of the town northwest of Austin. "This is the worst I can recall seeing it. I tell you, it's just pretty bleak."

There are 230 Texas public water systems under mandatory water restrictions, including those in and near San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and Austin. Another 60 or so have asked for voluntary cutbacks. Water levels are down significantly in lakes, rivers and wells around Texas.

Liberty Hill's Web site urges its 1,400 or so residents in all-red letters to stop using unnecessary water with this plea: "If we follow these strict guidelines, we may have drinking water." The town's shortage eased some with the arrival this week of 35,000 gallons a day from a nearby water system, but residents are still worried.

According to drought statistics released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 77 of Texas' 254 counties are in extreme or exceptional drought, the most severe categories. No other state in the continental U.S. has even one area in those categories. John Nielsen-Gammon, the Texas state climatologist at Texas A&M University, said he expects harsh drought conditions to last at least another month.

In the bone-dry San Antonio-Austin area, the conditions that started in 2007 are being compared to the devastating drought of the 1950s. There have been 36 days of 100 degrees or more this year in an area where it's usually closer to 12.

Among the most obvious problems are the lack of water in Lake Travis

and Lake Buchanan near Austin, two massive reservoirs along the Colorado River that provide drinking water for more than 1 million people and also are popular boating and swimming spots. Streams and tributaries that feed the lakes have "all but dried up," according to the Lower Colorado River Authority.

Lake Travis is more empty than full, down 54 percent. All but one of the 12 boating ramps are closed because they no longer reach the water, and the last may go soon. The receding waters have even revealed old stolen cars shoved into the lake years ago, authorities said.

There's no threat to the area's drinking water supply, Bob Rose said, but there are increased boating hazards from the "sometimes islands" that pop up when the water's low, increased risk of wildfires, and more interactions between humans and wildlife.

"We're seeing deer and armadillo and other animals in places we don't typically see them," he said. "They're starving for water and food."

At the Oasis, a popular restaurant with a deck overlooking Lake Travis, the islands are even starting to grow heavy vegetation.

"You can see all the white on the rocks where the waterline used to be," said Becca Torbert, a server at the restaurant who says the boat traffic is down, but the water's down even more.

San Antonio, which relies on the Edwards Aquifer for its water, is enduring its driest 23-month period since weather data was recorded starting in 1885, according to the National Weather Service. The aquifer's been hovering just above 640 feet deep, and if it dips below that the city will issue its harshest watering restrictions yet.

The city's not just sitting around, though. A total of 30 off-duty officers

and other employees are working overtime to patrol the city looking for people illegally watering. Since April, about 1,500 people have been cited and ordered to pay fines ranging from \$50 to over \$1,000.

Residents also are encouraged to rat out water scofflaws on the 24-hour Water Waste Hot Line.

"We don't go out in a car with sirens blazing or anything like that, but we do take the report and send out a letter saying 'You've been reported for not following water rules,'" said Anne Hayden, spokeswoman for the San Antonio Water System.

There have been smatterings of light rain in the area this week, but not enough to make much difference. But hopefully, the end is in sight.

Victor Murphy, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said an El Nino system is developing in the Pacific Ocean. That phenomenon is usually followed by increased rainfall in Texas in the fall.

McLeod, from Liberty City, hopes his little town can hang on till then.

"I don't know how we can," he said. "I try not to look too far ahead."

On the Web: U.S. Department of Agriculture drought map of Texas:

<http://tinyurl.com/nt5ety>

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