

Drought rattles farmers in eastern China

February 25 2011, by Boris Cambreleng



Villagers are seen carrying bottled drinking water in a drought-blighted region of China. A widespread record drought in the east of the country is threatening to send global food prices even higher as China's key wheat crop falters.

Yu Ruicheng's weathered face creases with worry as she stands on her dry wheat field in eastern China, where a record drought is threatening to send soaring global food prices even higher.

"If it doesn't rain next month, we won't harvest anything," the 62-year-old farmer says, crouching down and sifting parched soil through her fingers, pointing to dried-up [wheat](#) shoots scattered across her plot of land.

[China](#) is the largest global producer and consumer of wheat. A bad harvest would not only devastate local farmers -- if China were to buy a large amount of wheat overseas due to a crop failure, world commodity

prices would surge.

The government has allocated 13 billion yuan (\$2 billion) to combat the drought, and the central bank announced this week it would provide 10 billion yuan in loans to farmers. But the aid injection cannot make the rains come.

"Even if it rains soon, the wheat harvest will be reduced by half compared to last year," Yu warns.

In Beishangping, a village nestled at the base of an arid hill in Shandong province, farmers will soon be unable to rely on the only [water reservoir](#) in the area to irrigate their crops -- it is now almost completely dry.

The area has not seen any significant rainfall since September, according to weather authorities in Linyi municipality where the village is located.

"Without a harvest, we will have no money and our life will become very difficult," said Yu, who like many other villagers is too old to move elsewhere to find work.

Families in Beishangping earn around 10,000 yuan (\$1,520) a year from farming, which also provides sustenance for the 700 inhabitants.

Villagers are now concerned drought will spell disaster for other crops when spring arrives.



Farmers water a drought-stricken wheat field using a generator-driven pump. Experts are calling on China to implement more long-term measures to fight drought, so that the dire situation seen in parched Shandong and other affected provinces does not recur.

"Without significant rain before Tomb Sweeping Day (on April 5), we will not be able to sow peanuts or cotton," Yu said.

Deeper into the valley, farmers irrigate their small plots with hosepipes linked to noisy machines that pump water from wells or rivers. Everywhere, people are concerned that the precious resource will soon run out.

The Yi river is almost dry because "the dam gates of Bashan lake, the source of the river, have been closed. No one will be able to live in this area when there is no more water in that lake," warns Guo Yubao, a young local.

Zhang Youtai, a farmer in the neighbouring Yinan district, explains that for his family of five, 50 percent of their income comes from wheat.

"The land plots are very small in our village, just around half a mu (0.3 hectares) per person. We use the wheat we grow for food. If we have a

bad harvest, we will have to buy some," he says.

The central government is implementing a number of emergency measures such as diverting water to the worst-affected areas and building wells.



A farmer shows drought-hit vegetable roots in his fields in Bozhou, eastern China. The central government is implementing a number of emergency measures such as diverting water to the worst-affected areas and building wells in the drought-hit east of the country.

Near Haizi village, a team from the southwestern province of Sichuan -- around 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) away -- digs a well over 100 metres (330 feet) deep to help irrigate crops.

Members of the team say they are doing this to thank volunteers from Shandong who traveled to help victims of the massive 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, which left nearly 87,000 dead or missing.

"With this well, if we have enough water, we'll maybe be able to rescue 30 percent of the harvest," said Haizi resident Niu Shujie.

According to Ma Wenfeng, an analyst who specialises in cereal markets at Orient Agribusiness Consultant in Beijing, China's winter wheat harvest should only diminish by around two percent if the situation does not deteriorate.

But "anticipation of bad (wheat) harvests linked to droughts in China, India, East Africa, as well as a bad rice [harvest](#) in Southeast Asia" has put an upward pressure on prices on international markets, Ma adds.

Experts are calling on China to implement more long-term measures to fight drought, so that the dire situation in Shandong and other affected provinces does not recur.

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