

Huge tract of Australia in 'biggest ever drought'

March 7 2014



Aerial view shows buildings and vegetation in Queensland town of Tully on February 3, 2011

The Australian state of Queensland is in the grip of its most widespread drought ever, with close to 80 percent of its territory parched after a failed wet season, officials said Friday.

Australia is famous for its droughts and flooding rains, and Queensland was hit by devastating floods in 2010-11 which left much of the state a

disaster zone and brought the state capital Brisbane to a standstill.

But the situation has now radically reversed, with 79 percent of the massive northeastern state—all bar a narrow northern coastal zone and a few other pockets—declared in drought.

"Queensland is a big state and there is usually a drought somewhere, but this is the largest area of Queensland that has ever been drought-declared at one time," state agriculture minister John McVeigh said.

Queensland is nearly seven times the size of Britain, with an area of 1.7 million square kilometres (656,000 square miles).

McVeigh said February was normally one of the wettest times of the year, but this time round many shires missed out on rain altogether.

Some of the newly drought-declared areas—prime regions for growing sugar cane—were flood zones just over a year ago.

Cyril Close, a stock agent in the Queensland town of Roma, said farmers were suffering.

"People in their 60s and 70s are looking to wind down now. They used up all their resources trying to keep their cattle alive, waiting for summer rain, but it never came," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

"They are just wondering how much further they can go, and do they go?"

Prime Minister Tony Abbott last month unveiled a Aus\$320 million assistance (US\$290 million) package for drought-hit farmers which included increased access to a concessional loan scheme as well as

mental health support.

"If your farm is in dire [drought](#), you can't sell, you can't borrow, you can't leave but you've got no money and that's why it's right and proper that you should have access to income support," Abbott said of his plan.

Australia experienced its hottest year on record in 2013, according to official figures, enduring the longest heatwave ever recorded Down Under as well as destructive bushfires.

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