

Spain, Portugal struggle with extreme drought

November 21 2017, by Adrien Vicente



Drought has caused river levels to drop in many areas of Spain and Portugal

Spain and Portugal are grappling with a devastating drought which has left rivers nearly dry, sparked deadly wildfires and devastated crops—and experts warn that prolonged dry spells will become more frequent.

The national weather office says 94 percent of Portugal is enduring what

it classifies as an "extreme" drought.

"The country has never experienced a drought like this in the sense that it worsened significantly in October, a time of the year when the situation normally improves," a climatologist with the weather office, Fatima Espirito Santo, told AFP.

Two-thirds of Spain has received considerably less rain during the last three years than it normally does.

"It's a ruinous situation," said Jose Ramon Gonzalez, a small rancher in Spain's normally rainy northwestern region of Galicia.

Due to the scarcity of grass, Gonzalez was forced to spend thousands of euros to buy fodder for his cattle in July, four months earlier than normal.

"There are rivers, springs, which neither I, at the age of 45, nor my parents, nor my grandparents, have seen dry which have dried up," he said.

About 1.38 million hectares (3.4 million acres) of grains, sunflowers and olive trees have been affected by drought or frost in Spain as of the end of October, according to Spanish farming insurance agency Agroseguro.

It has dished out more than 200 million euros (\$236 million) in compensation this year.

"You feel helpless like when you are sick, you can't do anything. This sickness is called drought," said Vicente Ortiz, a farmer and rancher in Spain's central Castilla-La Mancha region, whose endless plain is depicted in "Don Quixote", the famous work by Miguel de Cervantes.

Ortiz said his grain harvest has plunged 70 percent from last year and he expects to harvest half as many olives.

The situation is just as dire for farmers across the border in neighbouring Portugal.

"All crops are suffering from this lack of water in our region, from olives to grains and grapes," said Fremelinda Carvalho, the president of the association of farmers on Portalegre in central Portugal.

The dry fields and forests have fuelled wildfires, which killed 109 people this year in Portugal and five in Galicia, many dying in their cars as they tried to flee the flames.

Water conflicts

Water reservoirs are at abnormally low levels.

In Portugal 28 of the country's water reservoirs in October were at less than 40 percent of their storage capacity.

This weekend about a hundred fire trucks began transporting water from one dam in northern Portugal to another that is running dry and supplies water to Viseu, a city of around 100,000 residents.

In Spain the water reservoirs along the Tagus River, which empty into the Atlantic near Lisbon, were as of Monday at just 39.3 percent of their capacity.

The levels were even lower in the Douro River further north and the Segura River, which is used to irrigate crops in southeastern Spain.

Spain's largest power company, Iberdrola, saw its hydroelectric power

production plunge 58 percent during the first nine months of the year, compared to the same period last year, pushing up electricity prices.

The drought is also fuelling conflicts among regions over the use of water.

One source of tension is a massive aqueduct built in the 1960s during the Spanish dictatorship of Francisco Franco to siphon off water from the Tagus River to the smaller Segura River.

The Tagus River "can not support" this aqueduct, said Antonio Luengo, head of the agency that regulates water in Spain's Castilla-La Mancha region.

The water diverted from the Tagus had been used to massively develop fruit and vegetable farms in southeastern Spain and now water from the Mediterranean must be desalinated to support these crops, he said.

Climate risks

Experts warn that droughts are likely to become more frequent and severe in the region.

"Spain has since 1980 shown signs of climate change, which have increased since 2000," said Jorge Olcina, who heads the University of Alicante's climate institute.

The country's climate "tends to have more subtropical characteristics. Higher temperatures and rarer and more intense rains. So climate-related risks—heatwaves and rain and droughts and floods, will increase in the coming decades," he added.

Spain has managed water "very badly", said Julio Barea, spokesman for

the Spanish branch of Greenpeace.

He cited as examples the use of water to irrigate trees that do not normally need much water, such as olive and almond trees, and the planting of water-intensive crops that are not suited to Spain's Mediterranean climate.

Both governments have promised financial aid to farmers, who still anxiously wait for rain.

"We are constantly looking at the sky," said Ortiz, the rancher in Castilla-La Mancha.

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