

Autumn rainfall improves drought conditions in Texas, but winter to set back progress

November 28 2022, by Jamie Landers



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As heat waves kept temperatures in the triple digits for weeks and a rain-free streak spanned more than two months in some places, more than

70% of Texas was experiencing severe drought conditions this summer—fueling wildfires, reducing crop yields and even revealing never-before-seen dinosaur tracks.

As of last week, bouts of recent rainfall have drastically improved conditions, with only 38% of the state now experiencing [severe drought](#), according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

The change has been conspicuous in North Texas: All of Dallas County was in the extreme drought stage in mid-August, but now 62% of the county is not experiencing any drought while the remainder is classified merely as abnormally dry. Rockwall County and parts of Collin County are currently drought-free.

The drought monitor's latest data says only about 15% of Texas—mostly in the central portion of the state—is in extreme or exceptional drought. In neighboring Oklahoma, that number is 64%.

It's highly anticipated progress, but experts say Texas' luck will soon run dry.

'Much needed drought relief'

Statewide, the drought monitor's latest monthly report said, October's precipitation was below average for all but western Texas, until storms the week of Oct. 24 brought 1 to 5 inches of rain to the northeastern part of the state.

More than 2 inches of widespread rainfall "across northern Texas provided much needed drought relief and provide short-term improvement while also helping fill area reservoirs in advance of winter," the report said.

In Dallas-Fort Worth, the rain came slowly, then all at once.

After 67 straight days without measurable rain at DFW International Airport, August brought a record rainfall of 10.68 inches, according to the National Weather Service. That rain mostly stemmed from a "one-in-a-thousand-years" storm Aug. 22, which swamped roads, submerged cars and prompted Gov. Greg Abbott to sign a disaster declaration for 23 counties, including Dallas and Tarrant.

The flood was followed by another rainless spell between Sept. 5 and Oct. 10, the [weather service](#) said.

But November's storms pulled Dallas-Fort Worth out of the rainfall deficit it entered in September 2021, and raised the annual rainfall total to 34.25 inches.

Since Nov. 1, the region has seen about 6.4 inches of rain, according to the weather service. Just over 3 inches fell on Nov. 4, and more than 2 inches came from scattered showers the week of Thanksgiving.

And it's paying off: The Texas A&M Forest Service said it has not responded to a wildfire since Nov. 5.

"Increased moisture and the lack of widespread elevated fire weather has kept activity minimal," the forest service said on Twitter earlier this month, noting there were still 84 counties with burn bans in place.

Drought predicted to return

The drought monitor's report said Texas' progress may soon be lost, with the upcoming winter strongly favoring below-normal precipitation for the state, adding that "the seasonal drought outlook shows continued or returning drought for the region."

One of the primary drivers of that returning drought is the third consecutive year of a La Niña pattern, the report said.

La Niña, the cold phase of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation, is when the Pacific Ocean's surface temperatures near the equator cool and influence weather patterns around the world.

In North Texas, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association anticipates that means 40% to 50% probability of above-normal temperatures from December to February.

In much of West Texas and parts of East Texas, the Climate Prediction Center said, this La Niña may create worsening [drought](#) conditions as precipitation is pushed north.

While a historic winter storm mirroring that of 2021 is "very unlikely," experts say Texans can still expect ice, snow and freezing temperatures in the months ahead.

"You're going to have periods of cool weather, you're going to have winter, you're going to have the typical ice storms that you have sometimes, even in Texas," said Jon Gottschalck, chief of the operational prediction branch of the Climate Prediction Center.

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