Poor planning compounds problems as drought plagues Southeast US

Ed Hightower
13 November 2007

A prolonged drought in the southeastern United States is crippling the entire region and threatens millions with the prospect of running out of one of modern life's most basic necessities: running water.

The drought started in early 2006 in northern Georgia and Alabama but has since spread to southeast Tennessee, the western portion of the Carolinas, parts of Virginia, southern Maryland and as far north as Illinois and Ohio and as far south as the Florida panhandle. Lack of rain and unusually high temperatures throughout the summer, compounded by a general lack of planning, have strained state and local infrastructures to the breaking point.

The dimensions of the drought, the most severe the Southeast has seen in 113 years, are staggering. The federal Department of Agriculture's Drought Monitor has said that 32 percent of the Southeast region is in a state of D4 drought, the most severe category. The Department defines the D4 designation as "exceptional," meaning that it should not be expected more than once or twice every century.

For North Carolina and Tennessee it is the driest year on record; for Alabama, the second driest and the third driest for Kentucky. A study of Tennessee's rainfall history based on tree-rings shows 2007 is the third driest year for the state in at least 350 years, behind only 1839 and 1708.

When translated into economic terms, the drought is nothing short of a disaster. It has had a predictably destructive effect on the region's agriculture, costing billions in lost crops. In Georgia alone farmers have lost $787 million in cotton, hay, peanuts and maize. The state government in Alabama has declared 88 percent of the state's corn crop, along with 85 percent of its soybeans and 74 percent of its cotton, poor or very poor.

In the Carolinas and Virginia tobacco that has been harvested cannot properly "cure," a process of drying in a barn before sale, and is therefore worthless. The destruction of hay and other feed crops has increased the price of feeding cattleso much that ranchers are unable to make a profit, forcing them to sell their livestock at a loss**.**

Other sectors of the economy have been hard hit as well. Even local landmarks have succumbed to water shortage**.** Stone Mountain Georgia, a famous north Georgia theme park, was forced to cancel its annual "winter wonderland" event. A photo in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* showing a man throwing a snowball at Stone Mountain caused such uproar from area residents, parched by months of water use restrictions, that the Coca-Cola Company decided to refund ticket costs to purchasers.

The Jack Daniels distillery in Tennessee has warned that it may have to cease production because its well is so low. The University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, both in north Georgia, are struggling to keep the sprinklers on their football fields spraying. The Tennessee Valley Authority, which generates electricity used in seven states, had to halve its production of hydroelectric power due to low water levels.

The problem of drinking water is also widespread in the region. As of November 1, the old mining town of Omre, Tennessee had run completely out of water, a prospect facing many other municipalities, including the metropolis of Atlanta.

Officials in Omre are desperate for solutions. The town's fire truck has been making trips across the Alabama border to fill up with water that it then takes back to Omre's reservoir. Running water is available for only three hours in the day.

In Atlanta, the chamber of commerce has joined Governor Sonny Perdue in suing the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the release of water from Lake Lanier, which supplies 3 million people, or a third of the state's population, with drinking water. Lake Lanier's water level is at its lowest on record. At the current use level it has less than three months before it will be completely dry.

Lake Lanier has been central to the political blame game accompanying the drought. Originally built to control flood waters of its parent rivers, Lake Lanier now serves multiple functions, all of which are threatened by its unprecedented water level.

By federal mandate, the Army Corps of Engineers is

required to release over a billion gallons of water each day from the lake to protect two endangered species of mussels in Florida's Apalachicola bay and to serve a Florida coal burning power plant. In response to the recently filed lawsuit, the Corps replied that the current crisis is one of the states' making.

For several decades politicians in Georgia, Alabama and Florida have battled for their share of Lake Lanier's water. Time and again the state legislatures voted down plans to modernize the region's water system, despite warnings that it could not sustain a severe drought.

The failure to develop a plan to deal with a drought has been directly tied to profit interests in the region. In the 1990s the Georgia legislature axed a plan to create reservoirs because builders thought it would limit lands available for development. A proposal for a state-funded regional reservoir failed in 2004.

In January the Georgia legislature will consider two proposals on the issue. One is a $30 million study of the state's water resources. The other is similar to previous proposals for a system of state reservoirs. Given the state's budgetary situation, passage of these plans remains uncertain.

The drought highlights the inability of the profit system to carry out rational social planning. Years of poorly regulated growth in the metro Atlanta area have thoroughly overwhelmed the existing water infrastructure. Even in the midst of the drought, politicians have proven incapable of an effective response. Governors in the region have made a series of pleas for residents to reduce their water usage, as if that might have some tangible effect.

Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue declared October "shorter shower" month, while his ban on lawn watering exempts golf courses. Only slightly less ineffectual was his decree that municipalities cut back their draw on Lake Lanier by 10 percent.

The response of Perdue has reached absurd proportions. According to one account, the governor is holding religious services in order to pray for rain. "The only solution is rain," the governor's spokesman said, "and the only place we get that is from a higher power." Of course, blaming God for the state's drought problems is also a convenient way of taking the pressure off Perdue himself.

While it is difficult to attribute any particular weather phenomenon directly to global warming, the Southeast drought fits well into the picture presented in the most recent assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In the Summary for Policy Makers released in February the panel notes, "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level."

The impact of global warming on the world's climate is profound. The assessment noted widespread changes in precipitation amounts and wind patterns and found increased frequency of extreme weather phenomena, including droughts and heat waves. Studies have observed more intense, longer droughts in wider areas, especially the tropics and subtropics, since the 1970s. Even changes in sea surface temperature, decreased precipitation and snow pack are linked to more frequent and intense droughts.

One general consequence of global climate change is the erratic nature of weather patterns. The added energy in the earth's atmosphere has effects that are difficult to predict and that greatly change the climate of many regions. Thus many farmers in the region were unprepared for a protracted shortage of rain, something formerly thought of as an issue only for farmers farther west.

More severe weather phenomena have taken their toll across the country and internationally. While the ecological consequences of global warming will be immense, the major world powers, and above all the American government—beholden to the interests of corporations and the oil industry—have opposed any serious attempts to deal with the problem.

The drought in the Southeast is not expected to let up any time soon. Typically the southeastern US states experience heavy seasonal rainfall from hurricanes, which were in short supply this year. A La Nina weather system is in effect, which means that the winter should be particularly dry. In the meantime more cities will find their water sources drying up soon, including Atlanta and Birmingham.

The drought is taking its toll amidst the backdrop of the California wildfire, the collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minnesota, the devastation wrought by tornados in the Great Plains region, and Hurricane Katrina. Like these disasters the drought underscores the inability of the capitalist system to meet the most fundamental human needs. With social resources organized for the further enrichment of a tiny layer of the super-wealthy, firefighting, roadway maintenance, water usage planning and myriad other public services are curtailed with catastrophic results.