

Worst drought in decades hits France

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Until last week, when storms on Monday and Tuesday provided a small amount of relief, France was hit by one of the worst droughts of the last 100 years. In the April-May period, this year's weather has surpassed in both heat and dryness the drought of 1976.

At that time, the government levied a national tax to provide aid to stricken farmers, the army was sent into the fields to harvest and transport hay, and hydroelectric production dropped by 30%.

Météo France has reported that the median temperature in France this spring has been more than 2.5 degrees C above normal, while the median rainfall has been less than 50 percent of the normal amount. In March, several regions—including Brittany, Picardy, and Lorraine—received less than 30 percent of their normal rainfall. This situation worsened in April, when the national average was only 29 percent of normal.

This amount increased slightly to 37 percent in May, but it was still the driest May of the last half-century.

By mid-May of this year, 26 of mainland France's 100 *départements* (local districts) were seriously affected by the drought. A total of 61 *départements* have imposed restrictions on the use of water, with 39 restricting use at least one day per week and 24 imposing total restrictions.

According to Météo France, the drought has been exacerbated by lower than normal rainfalls between September 2010 and February 2011. This drained subsurface water tables, which are usually replenished by rain and snow runoff during the winter. In addition, the snowfall providing runoff in both the Alps and the Pyrenees mountains has been below average this year.

French livestock farmers—particularly cattle farmers—are caught in a vicious cycle. They have taken to slaughtering cows prematurely, to raise money for hay to feed the remaining herds. The additional supply of beef is driving down prices, which were already in freefall. *France Info* interviewed a farmer in the

commune of Montmorillon, who last week sold a cow for €1,100 that would normally bring between €1,500 and €1,800.

The price of straw has already doubled in some areas and tripled in others, and there are growing fears of speculators. Minister of Agriculture Bruno Le Maire has publicly made noise about limiting the cost to €25 per ton, but later on TF1 television, he ruled out government action and encouraged livestock farmers to sign contracts with private suppliers at that price.

Le Maire has also ruled out a supplemental income tax like that levied in 1976, which was politically unpopular. Instead, he announced this week that the National Fund for Indemnification against Agricultural Calamities (*Fonds national de garantie des calamités agricoles*, or FNGCA) will make limited aid available to farmers affected by the drought.

The Fund receives some revenues from the government, but is funded mainly by a surcharge levied on farmers who buy liability insurance and insurance on buildings. The Fund's web site states that it typically covers only about 30 percent of losses when it releases aid.

At a press conference in the Charente *département* last Thursday, President Sarkozy also ruled out direct government aid. He blamed the European Union, telling farmers that “we will not fall back into the bad habit of giving you allocations which will be declared illegal in a few months” by the EU. Instead, Sarkozy promised various limited measures: releasing €200 million from the FNGCA, waiving the tax on uncultivated land, and paying the interest on existing loans held by stricken farmers with state funds.

The program announced by the government amounts to a limited series of half-measures. Sarkozy and Prime Minister Francois Fillon boasted that all told the aid package is worth nearly €1 billion. This amount pales in comparison to the €40 billion of state funds with

which Sarkozy and his finance minister, Christine Lagarde, recapitalized French banks in the fall of 2008.

Sarkozy also pledged that the military and SNCF national railways will be available to transport hay and other agricultural projects. The Sarkozy government has also given farmers access to grass mowed from along the sides of highways to feed livestock.

Cattle farmers are not the only ones suffering, and the effects of the drought on grain prices is likely to intensify inter-European conflicts caused by the ongoing *E. Coli* epidemic centered in Germany.

Forecasts of the yield of soft wheat (used in pastries and snack foods) from countries affected by the drought have fallen by 3.6 million tons, according to the web site www.commodityonline.com. Despite Chinese denials of a shortage from a drought in that country, there is concern that combined shortages will drive up worldwide wheat prices. Barley yields will also be impacted by the European drought.

As in 1976, French energy production is being seriously affected. *Le Monde* has reported a 29% drop in hydroelectric energy production in April, when compared to April 2010. Concern is also growing about the availability of water to cool nuclear reactors in the most seriously affected areas.

In contrast to the drought, localized hail and flooding due to rainfall in southeastern France have ruined much of this year's cherry and apple crop. Hail is not included in the weather events reimbursed by the government, according to *Le Monde*—meaning that farmers without their own insurance in the Vaucluse Departement will be left to fend for themselves.

While severe droughts would occur even without climate change linked to human activity, Météo France released a report on May 16, summarizing International Panel on Climate Change projections through the end of the 21st century. These indicate increasing contrasts in rainfall between Northern and Southern Europe. The Météo France report also described trends in the period 1951-2000, including higher daytime temperatures, increased frequency of heat waves, and a general decrease in summer rainfall.



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