

Historic heat wave and drought in southwestern US

Charles Abelard, Tom Carter
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A record-breaking heat wave and drought is relentlessly blasting the southwestern US, and in particular the state of Texas, which is experiencing the driest 10-month period in recorded history.

As always, the burden of these environmental calamities falls disproportionately on the working class. Twelve deaths have been attributed to the heat in the city of Dallas alone so far this year.

According to reports from the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), as of August 8 Texas had received only 6 inches of rain so far this year, less than half the expected rainfall over the same period, which is 13 inches. This is the lowest rainfall on records dating back to 1895. In addition, the June and July temperatures were far above historical levels.

As much as 94 percent of Texas has a drought level of “D3-extreme” or “D4-exceptional,” the two most severe stages of drought defined by the US Department of Agriculture, respectively. A staggering 75 percent of the state is at level D4, the highest level.

Energy usage in response to the record heat has strained the electrical grid to the near-breaking point. Private companies have increased prices to as much as 60 times their normal levels in response, gouging consumers and small businesses. The Texas electrical grid, largely cut off from other states, is entirely dependent on the profit interests of a few giant corporations.

The effects of this drought, both agricultural and hydrological, will leave their mark for years to come. More than half of Texas’s streams and rivers are

flowing at half their normal rate. Many water reservoirs are practically empty.

The 12 heat-related deaths in Dallas reported so far are more than all of last year. Nationwide, 100 people have died from the heat in the US this summer. Temperatures are above 110 degrees Fahrenheit in many places. A brief respite over the weekend broke a nearly 40-day streak of consecutive days in Dallas where temperatures exceeded 100 degrees.

The heat levels are so extreme that sidewalks and roads have been observed literally exploding from the extreme temperatures, resulting in significant damage to the already deteriorating infrastructure of many cities. Winter moisture trapped in roadway paving material expands rapidly into gas in the furnace-like heat.

Ice companies are renting record numbers of trucks to deliver ice to desperate customers. Restaurants are heavy users of emergency ice, since many cannot produce enough on their own to cope with the heat. Tap water temperatures are at levels of 90 degrees and more. Railroad rails are buckling, leading to a very high risk of trains derailing, although no actual derailments from this cause have been reported yet.

Most of the fish in the nearly dry O.C. Fisher reservoir in San Angelo State Park in West Texas have died. The decomposing fish are thought to have depleted the oxygen level in what little water remains in the reservoir. In turn this has allowed Chromatiaceae, a bacterium that thrives on low-oxygen conditions, to multiply rapidly. This has turned the water to an eerie opaque red color, recalling images of the tragic Dust

Bowl conditions that accompanied the Great Depression of the 1930s in many areas of the US.

Livestock pastures are turning to dirt, with one-inch cracks opening in the clay soil, which shrinks when dry and swells when wet. Ranchers cannot afford feed or water their animals. As a result, they are selling them off prematurely for beef.

This year's corn crop is badly stunted; many of the yellowing plants reached a height of only 3 feet high and failed to produce a single ear. Experts fear the state's \$100 billion agriculture market will suffer a record-breaking loss of as high as \$8-9 billion.

Rancher John Warren, interviewed on a local Texas television station, said a 100-acre reservoir he has used "for generations" has dropped to only 4 acres. "If this continues for another year, I'll have to get a job at Walmart.... It's horrible. Weeds won't even grow." Warren abruptly stopped the interview when he spotted a small wildfire on a neighbor's property and ran off to alert him.

Texas is a state where high school and college football is big business. Deaths from heat among youth athletes are occurring with disturbing regularity at football practices. There are no guidelines limiting practice in extremely hot and dry weather. With big profits and careers on the line, coaches sometimes put extreme pressure on their young athletes to perform hard physical training, regardless of the temperature.

An ABC news clip showed that a football helmet set out in the afternoon sun was at 154 degrees Fahrenheit after sitting in the sun for only 15 minutes, with nobody wearing it. Doctors have explained that the heat that accumulates in the helmeted heads of the young athletes under the hot sun when the temperature exceeds 100 Fahrenheit is extreme and potentially lethal. Two Georgia football players died this week while practicing in the heat.

Climatologists have indicated that the extreme temperatures and drought could continue for as long as another year.

Contrary to statements made endlessly in the media, it is not true that droughts, heat waves, and other extreme weather events "have no politics." Although these events would doubtless occasionally occur even without climate change linked to human activity, scientific research has clearly confirmed that human activity has contributed to the increasing frequency of such events.

Further, the US government, and the social system as a whole, has proven utterly incapable of addressing this problem, just as it was incapable of disciplining BP for poisoning the Gulf of Mexico in the Deepwater Horizon disaster. First, environmental damage that contributes to drought continues unabated and is not being reversed, and second, nothing is being done to alleviate the harm caused by the extreme weather events themselves.

In the US, the same wealthy elite that profits from the reckless pollution of the environment and contributes to climate change is doing nothing to alleviate the devastation brought about to workers and youth in the drought-stricken South and Southwest. Meanwhile, the major banks are no doubt positioning themselves to gobble up the lands of small farmers and ranchers who have been ruined by the disastrous heat.



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