

Got Drought? Tend Man's Garden

by Franklin Bell

Is the multi-year drought across the American West and northern Mexico, spreading east? More than the primary U.S. water transport systems and the Corn Belt are under attack. What's the solution?

As with the other stuff, drought happens. Midwesterners recall 1997, 1988, and 1983. June 2005 was only the tenth-driest since 1895 in Illinois. Yet the drought now is bad enough to shut down barge traffic on the usually mighty Ohio River, at its confluence with the Mississippi, the heart of the nation's interior supposedly navigable waterways system. And even on the Mississippi—the river U.S. Grant proclaimed “too thick to drink, too wet to plow”—barges are having to lighten their loads to get through the channels. On the Missouri, it's a constant fight between *leaving* some water upstream, and *having* some downstream.

Worldwide Problem

The transport-disrupting, crop-destroying drought in the Midwest is but part of a world picture. Spain is in the midst of its worst drought in more than a half century. Portugal, and parts of France, Italy, and Greece are also afflicted. European Union officials say this year is on track to match the disastrous wildfire year 2003, when some 740,000 hectares (nearly 1,830,000 acres) were charred. Along Thailand's eastern seaboard, the Federation of Thai Industries in July said that water supplies would only last another month. Goats are dropping of thirst by the roadsides in western China, where drought has dried up 80,000 storage ponds. In India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Islamic Republic News Agency quotes the state's Agriculture Minister saying, “Rats in hundreds are destroying paddy fields, fruit farms, and even entering houses.” And drought, locusts, disease, and malnutrition threaten some 200 million people in the nations of sub-Saharan Africa, while the financial oligarchy and its Malthusian governments wring hands and tighten screws.

So who's doing what about it? In the United States, almost weekly, another Midwest governor announces that he's asking U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns for emergency disaster relief for his state's farmers. When Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich appealed to the Bush regime, he asked that every one of the state's 102 counties be declared “natural” disaster areas. Allen Baker, a USDA Economic Research Service corn analyst, is putting a happy farmer face on the destruction of the crop. Twenty-nine of the country's 33 corn-producing

states are going to have lower yields than last year. But prices remain low.

Overall the U.S. corn harvest this fall is expected to be 12% less than that of 2004. In Illinois, it will be down by one-third, contributing to a \$2 billion loss for the state's farmers. “Prices will be stronger,” Baker told the *Christian Science Monitor* recently. But last year was a bumper year for corn. Ample stored supplies mean that prices may not go up as much as farmers would hope. And, for its part, *The New York Times* has helped by writing drought copy that begins and ends with the plight of Harrah's on the Ohio—the Illinois riverboat casino forced to shut down for a couple of nights because the boat was more than figuratively stuck in the mud.

As the Aug. 18 U.S. Department of Agriculture Drought Monitor (**Figure 1**) shows, the Rocky Mountain West, the West Coast, and the High Plains are no longer the regions most severely ravaged by drought. But neither are they in danger of being declared wetlands. The drought of the past six, seven, eight, or more years there is still making havoc. Lake Meade and Lake Powell, the two huge reservoirs on the Colorado River that supply water to much of the West, are still below 50% of capacity. Lake Powell could be dry by 2007. South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture Larry Gabriel reports that some 190,000 acres of the West are currently ablaze. And millions of acres of drought-stressed forests in the 12 Western states are being killed by beetles. Last year, it was 8.6 million acres, according to U.S. Forest Service figures; in 1997, it was 1.4 million. This provides ready fuel for more fires.

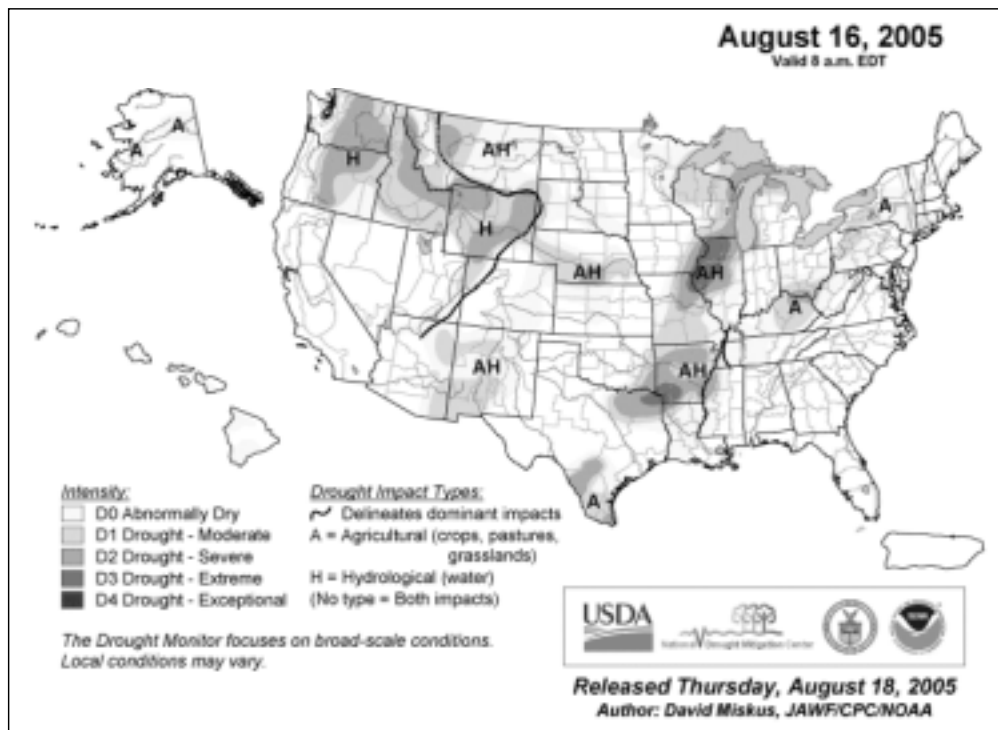
Ask Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld where the states' primary firefighters, their National Guards, are. South Dakota rancher Ron Wiczorek reports that cattlemen there are seeing flare-ups of endemic anthrax, caused in part by drought, but also by lax standards of vaccination in a de facto deregulated environment.

Not Just Mother Nature

Why do variants of these “natural” calamities sow their destruction time and again? The short answer is that we have not been tending man's garden. We've let existing infrastructure go to hell, and refused to build new. Example: along the bottlenecked Ohio at its confluence with the Mississippi are two decrepit relics, Locks 52 and 53. Built in 1929, and duct-taped since, they were long ago slated to be replaced by the Olmstead Locks and Dam. The Waterways Council now says when that will be completed “is not certain.” Continental water development projects, such as the North American Water and Power Alliance, which could augment river flows even during dry spells, have lain 40 years on the drawing boards. Safe, modern nuclear power plants, which could lessen the use of coal, are on Greenpeace's trophy room wall. And railroads, which once served as arterial alternates to barge transport, have been allowed to degenerate to trike paths.

FIGURE 1

Areas of Severe Drought, Harming Agriculture and Water Uses, August 2005



Barge Traffic Halted on Ohio River, Above Confluence with Mississippi, Due To Very Low Water Level



7-Mile stretch on Ohio River, closed in August