

# SAN JACINTO RIVER AUTHORITY KIDS PAGE

## SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DROUGHT



### Q. What is a DROUGHT?

**A.** According to the National Weather Service, “Drought is a deficiency in precipitation over an extended period, usually a season or more, resulting in a water shortage causing adverse impacts on vegetation, animals, and/or people.” Unlike hurricanes and floods, drought comes on over a period of time and can therefore be more difficult to detect, or to predict when one will begin or end. While forecasting drought is not an exact science, there are measures people, cities, and institutions can take to help protect themselves from the social, economic and environmental impacts of drought. This is called drought mitigation -- taking actions before, or at the beginning of, a drought to help reduce harmful impacts.

The U.S. Drought Monitor was created to assess drought severity scientifically and uniformly. Since 1999, various agencies, institutions of higher learning, and municipalities have pooled their resources and expertise to better categorize drought. The Drought Mitigation Center issues weekly national assessments of drought severity.

### Q. Now that we’ve had so much rain, is the DROUGHT over?

**A.** Weather experts point out that “a drought isn’t over until all the lakes are full.” While our area has received substantial rain this winter, and Lakes Houston, Conroe and Livingston are virtually 100 percent full, other geographic areas still have not had any rain and their drought conditions continue unabated. The numbers for Lake Buchanan and Lake Travis in the Texas Hill Country have not improved and are only at 38 percent and 36 percent of capacity respectively.

Another statistic to consider is annual rainfall compared to the “normal” amounts. Looking at records for the past 6 years in key areas, show some disturbing rainfall deficits. \*For example, Houston (at Bush Intercontinental Airport) is “short” 50.16 inches, which means that an entire year’s worth of rainfall is missing from the climate record and rainfall has been below average each year since 2009. Victoria, to the southeast of Houston, has recorded an 81.41 inch deficit -- which equals two entire years of missing rain!

Drought is a recurring feature of nearly every climate on the planet. In many parts of the world, including North America, we have very little ability to predict when or where one will

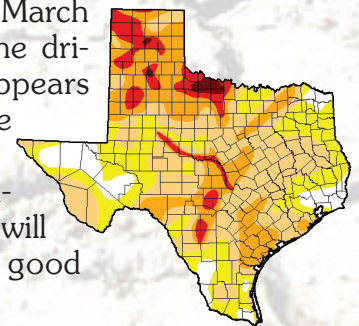
occur; the only certainty is that drought will happen again at some point. If the drought occurs in the state’s “grocery store” -- like the Panhandle region where much of our corn, cotton and cattle are raised -- the impacts are felt far and wide in product availability and cost.

### Q. What area of the economy gets hit hardest by prolonged drought?

**A.** Agriculture is the largest consumer of water in the United States, so it is the most sensitive to drought. Farmers and ranchers continue to suffer from drought impacts long after the disaster subsides. Some impacts are more obvious than others; drought can increase a crop’s susceptibility to disease and insects, and reduce the potential for future crop survival. Wind erosion and the loss of good organic soil can also reduce productivity for many years to come. Reduced crop quantity and quality makes it difficult for a farmer to recover from drought. Sadly, 2014 is shaping up to be an exceptionally tough year for agriculture across much of the nation, where persistent drought and erratic weather patterns have led to higher prices for grain crops. Less water, of course, means fewer food crops. And fewer food crops means less available cattle feed -- one of the reasons that many cattlemen had to prematurely sell off their herds, resulting in the smallest overall cattle herd in 61 years. Adding insult to injury, is this colder than average winter, which means that cattle need more food to stay healthy. Texas cattlemen have been hit across the board, and this impacts the entire beef business -- from the ranch to the plate. As the herds diminish, the price of beef increases.

### Q. Is there any Texas drought relief in sight?

**A.** Global weather patterns that have favored drought have been around for the last 5-10 years and they mimic conditions during the epic drought of the 1950’s. There is little indication that these patterns are changing. Even if they did change, the impact would be slow and seen over the course of years and not months. March is traditionally one of the driest months. While it appears that the overall climate patterns likely to support below normal rainfall will continue, there will occasionally be some good soaking rains. 💧



\* Jeffrey Lindner, Harris County Flood Control District , 2-20-2014