

Conditions good for quick, early harvest

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Standing water this summer has caused problems for corn in the south central and southeast regions of Nebraska, but good conditions in the state's northeastern region may compensate for those other regions, according to a University of Nebraska-Lincoln state climatologist.

Al Dutcher, state climatologist in the university's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said recent dry conditions are helping the western area.

"The corn crop is much more advanced this year than it was last year at this time," Dutcher said.

Dutcher said the crop was so far behind last year it got caught by freezing temperatures in October, followed by a wet period that slowed down harvest activities. Producers still were trying to harvest in December, but some couldn't finish until spring.

Despite water issues this summer, the south central and southeast Nebraska corn crop is close to maturity. Dutcher said a good portion of the crop should be mature the first half of September, and he wouldn't be shocked if producers begin to harvest corn around that time.

"Overall, we have much better conditions this year than last year in regard to harvest weather," Dutcher said. "The only areas of concern are the northern, central Panhandle and northern Sandhills, which were cool during the month of May, but they should get the corn to maturity if a widespread freeze doesn't occur before the average mean freeze date, which is between the Oct. 7-10."

Dutcher said a strong La Nina event is coming, possibly one of the strongest in the past 50 years.

In recent events, he said it was a fairly decent harvest period with above normal temps and dryer conditions with intermediate periods of above normal precipitation. He said high pressure would sit and hold for seven to 10 days at a time, giving farmers a long enough stretch to use Mother Nature for natural drying, something Nebraska producers like to do.

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This year should not be a problem, he said, for producers who want to use Mother Nature to dry the corn. It looks like there will be above normal precipitation periods, but Dutcher said it doesn't look like there will be long stretches of muddy field conditions.

"A rapid harvest, even with a lot of rainfall, should be here this fall," Dutcher said. "Nothing points to an extended wet pattern."

A bigger concern is water flow for the areas adjacent to the Platte River, upstream of Lake McConaughy. In those adjacent areas, Dutcher said the stream flow is three to four times higher than normal.

The Lake McConaughy reservoir is already at 89.7% of its capacity and federal mandates say the reservoir must stay under 90% of its total capacity by Oct. 1 through March to minimize damage on the dam. Dutcher said any water coming into the McConaughy reservoir will need to be released.

This should not affect the coming harvest, he said, since there is not a lot of agricultural land within the flood plain. So the concern for the fall is what the Bureau of Reclamation in Wyoming does with Wyoming reservoirs in anticipation of the winter season.

"Decisions need to be made on how to move water around," Dutcher said.

He said water eventually will need to be released downstream to make room for next spring's snow melt. Dutcher said higher flows into McConaughy are very likely for the spring because lower irrigation demand this year has kept the major Wyoming reservoirs exceptionally high for this time of the year.

Even with a below normal snow year, he said, there may not be enough storage space in the upstream reservoirs to handle all of the runoff.

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“If mountain snows are above normal this winter, I expect stream flow rates entering McConaughy to once again exceed 3 to 4 times normal rates next spring, with above normal flows also likely downstream of McConaughy,” Dutcher said.

He said downstream flooding risk will be determined by precipitation during the April through May period. The Platte can handle higher than normal releases from McConaughy as long as runoff from precipitation is not excessive, according to Dutcher. Once spring planted crops and grass begin rapid growth in early June, he said, the flooding risk decreases rapidly as a greater percentage of rainfall goes into the soil instead of running off.