

Second 'dust bowl' is possibility

By Ron Ruggless and Kim Shepherd

Drought may plague Nebraska again according to Norman Rosenberg, UNL agriculture engineering professor.

"We are simply overdue for another severe drought," Rosenberg said, citing a climatic cycle theory based on climate and weather reports.

History shows a repetition of drought about every 22 years. The last droughts were in the 1890s, 1910s, 1930s and the late 1950s, he said, making drought in the 1970s "extremely likely."

"A 22-year cycle makes the most sense scientifically," Rosenberg added, because solar energy (sun spots)—which change the motion of air masses and the ocean's temperature—occur in the same time cycle.

This theory, not fully proven, has been endorsed by many scientists in meteorology, he said.

Nebraska may be in the midst or at the end of its periodic drought, Rosenberg said.

Impact could be severe

"It is possible the droughts in the summers of '74 and '75 may be an indication of a dry period," he said. "Actually, the '74 dry period was just about as severe as in the '30s. It was no minor event by any means."

The soil moisture has been depleted, he added, and "if next year is as dry, the impact will be severe."

Donald Hanway, chairman of the UNL Agronomy Dept, said an extremely warm, dry fall in 1975 used up the water reserves plants need.

A wet summer would not help the dry conditions, he said, because the spring rains replenish the water reserves several feet beneath the earth which plants use during dryer summer months. The moist earth allows proficient root growth in the spring.

Irrigation, like "money in the bank," will help reduce the effects of a drought, Hanway said, along with efficient crop production and more sophisticated farming habits.

Precautions can be taken

Rosenberg said precautions can be taken to ease the adverse conditions of a drought. Many farmers are turning to less moisture-sensitive crops.

Corn requires much moisture, he said, while sorghum can exist with less and soybeans thrive under dryer conditions.

Hanway said the UNL Agronomy Dept. is "developing new varieties (of crops) that will tolerate heat and drought better than in the past."

UNL's history, agriculture, engineering, economics, business, political science, computer science and sociology dept. soon maybe working on a drought strategy plan.

"The general purpose of the project is the development and implementation of proper crop management decisions, reducing losses in times of drought," Hanway said.

Departments seeking grant

The departments are seeking a \$1,383,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to finance the two-year strategy planning.

Rosenberg said a drought would burden Nebraska's agriculturally-based economy, although less than before farming habits changed.

"Product losses may be smaller," he said, "but capital loss could be great because of the large amount of money invested in these farms."

People also are softer than they were years back, he said, and with limited energy supplies, priorities will have to be made.

"Does it go into air-conditioning or into irrigation?" he asked. "We will have to make that decision if a drought does occur."

Hanway said the crop producing systems of the future will minimize tillage and make more efficient use of herbicides.

This is because herbicides kill weeds that normally are killed by tilling, he said. With less tillage, less valuable surface water would evaporate, Hanway said.

Windbreaks, many of which were planted after the 1930s' drought, will hold down water evaporation and wind-erosion, he said, so the likelihood of another Dust Bowl is not as great.

Rosenberg said the country should maintain an adequate surplus of grain "to see us through the bad years," if they come.



Raglin

Drought would dent enrollment from out-state

A Nebraska drought inevitably would affect UNL's enrollment, said Al Papik, UNL admissions director, but he is unsure to what extent.

With 95 per cent of UNL students coming from Nebraska, a drought probably would put an economic squeeze on those attending the university, Papik said.

The overall impact could be lessened, he said, because many UNL students are from eastern Nebraska, especially Lincoln and Omaha.

Last semester 1,700 out of about 3,800 incoming Nebraska freshmen came from these two cities, Papik said, so a drought's economic effects may not reach this group as fast as out-state Nebraska students.

Although UNL enrollment increased during the 1975 recession, Papik said, "I have to believe, to some degree, that economic conditions do affect the amount of students going on to higher education."

"Increases in tuition and room and board at the same time could keep a lot of students from coming here," he added.

During tight economic times, students may consider

the increasingly popular two-year junior and technical colleges in the state, Papik said.

"They provide salable skills," he said, "and during a severe recession or drought they may look more attractive than a university."

During a drought, the Nebraska Legislature would be less likely to raise taxes to support the university, he said, and undoubtedly would ask for cut-backs in faculty members, staff and programs at state institutions.

Areas teaching nonsalable skills, such as philosophy, history and most of the arts and sciences, would be cut first, he said.

As for financial aid, he said, "just guessing," that the Health, Education and Welfare Dept. would be more tight fisted with its educational grant money.

Should a drought occur, they would focus on programs benefiting more people than just the student, Papik said.

"It is very hard to tell what will happen" if a dry spell is in Nebraska's future, he said.

NU enrollment records show that the drought in the late 1950s had little effect on enrollment.

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