

USDA final report details crop losses to drought

DAVID PITT - Associated Press - Associated Press

The federal government released its final crop report for 2012 on Friday, detailing heavy losses caused by the worst drought the U.S. has experienced since the 1950s.

Much of the attention focused on corn, which is widely used as an ingredient in many foods and as feed for livestock. Farmers produced less than three-fourths of the corn the U.S. Department of Agriculture anticipated when planting was done in the spring. The year-end report shows a harvest of 10.78 billion bushels, 27 percent less than the agency's initial estimate of 14.8 billion bushels.

The harvest, however, was still one of the largest in U.S. history. Farmers say better crop technology that improved the ability of corn to withstand drought saved them from more devastating losses, and production was helped by the large number of acres planted this year.

The USDA closed the year by saying farmers planted 97.2 million acres of corn, the most since 1937. Farmers have been planting more corn as demand has risen with ethanol production. Just a decade ago, fewer than 80 million acres were planted in corn.

While the drought eventually spread to cover two-thirds of the nation, its impact varied widely from one region of the corn belt to another. Some Iowa farmers saw decent results, while those in parts of Illinois and Indiana could only watch as plants withered and died after months of drought.

"I've yet to run into anyone around me that wasn't ready for 2013 to come," said Earl Williams, 62, a former Illinois Soybean Association president who farms 1,000 acres near Rockford, Ill.

Helped by crop insurance, he managed to break even last year despite getting 7 or 8 bushels less per acre than he usually does. His cornfields took an even bigger hit, producing 50 to 60 bushels short of the 150 to 160 bushels he'd typically reap.

The USDA had predicted a record average yield of 166 bushels per acre of corn when warm weather got farmers in the fields early. But the government began scaling back estimates as the drought spread across two-thirds of the nation.

Farmers may have reason to be nervous about prospects this spring when they hit the fields to plant again. The U.S. Drought Monitor's weekly updates have shown few signs the drought is relenting. Sixty percent of the continental U.S. is still in some form of drought, and climatologists say it would take an absurd amount of snow for conditions to change much during the winter. The best hope, they say, is for heavy spring rains.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

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Source URL (retrieved on 11/22/2014 - 10:51pm):

<http://www.chem.info/news/2013/01/usda-final-report-details-crop-losses-drought>