

Drought
The Parched Country
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Columbia SC

America's south-east has been wracked by more than a year without much rain

After 18 months of sunny skies and scorching heat, crops are shrivelling, lawns are crisping and lakes are drying up. This is not scorched California or America's arid south-west, but its normally lush south-east. The Department of Agriculture's "drought monitor" says that 32% of the region is in "exceptional drought," the most severe designation and one expected on this scale only once or twice a century. The problem is exacerbated by the south-east's inexperience with lack of rain, and by the area's booming population.

In Atlanta, the largest metropolitan area in the south-east, 3m residents will lose their main source of drinking water by January if



the level of nearby Lake Lanier continues its precipitous drop. Georgia's governor, Sonny Perdue, who earlier urged Georgians to take "shorter showers", filed a lawsuit on October 19th seeking to force the Army Corps of Engineers to stop draining so much water from Georgia's reservoirs to supply Alabama and Florida. A day later, he declared a state of emergency across the northern third of Georgia.

Outdoor watering bans already cover the affected part of the state, and local governments are considering rationing. Atlanta's mayor, Shirley Franklin, has suggested desalinating sea water from the Atlantic Ocean. Stone Mountain Park, Atlanta's popular theme park, has ceased making artificial snow for its Coca-Cola Snow Mountain.

The problems are widespread. North Carolina's governor, Michael F. Easley, urged residents last week to stop using water for any reason "not essential to public health and safety". In Tennessee, hydroelectric power production within the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the government agency that generates electricity for seven south-eastern states, has been halved because of low water supplies. The first five months of this year was the driest such period in the valley in its 118 years of record-keeping, the authority said.

Even normally verdant Florida, regularly battered by hurricanes and tropical storms that can dump up to 50 inches (1.3 metres) of rain annually, is feeling the pinch. Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest fresh-water lake in the country, is showing dry patches from lack of rain.

Agricultural economists say the drought is costing billions of dollars, with farmers in dire financial straits unless they had the foresight to buy federal crop insurance. In North Carolina tobacco hanging in barns is not curing because it's too dry. In South Carolina many cattle farmers are selling off their livestock because feed is running low or unavailable.

In Georgia officials say the drought so far has caused \$787m in lost production—primarily in hay, cotton, peanuts and maize. The 60% of Georgian farmers whose fields are not irrigated have lost all of their crops—a “staggering” situation, according to Tommy Irvin, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Officials can't yet say how many farmers in the south-east have been forced into bankruptcy, but one thing is certain: the states have no spare cash for relief.

The weather forecasters aren't offering much solace, either, predicting a warmer and drier winter than normal for the south-east. As for the longer term, the fear is that global warming will make droughts like these more common.