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Northeast Drought Dries Up Fall Activities and Local Markets

The Northeast region of the United States, currently facing the worst drought on record, has dried up farmland and crops that should currently be harvested.

This lack of yield is affecting markets, farmers' income and livestock. Cumulatively, the drought is affecting local and national economic markets. More personally affected are the well-known fall festivities of the northeast, especially Massachusetts.

"This is a unique situation for Massachusetts. We haven't seen a drought this bad in memory. No one farming currently has ever seen it this bad," says Jonathan Niedzielski, the state executive director of the Massachusetts State Farm Service Agency. Prior to the past spring season, the northeast has not experienced a drought since the 1960s, when the dry weather stretched for almost six years.

"This is the worst I've seen, and by all meteorologist standards," says Glenn Cook, president of the Massachusetts Fruit Growers Associations and the owner of Cider Hill Farm in Amesbury.

Both Cook and Niedzielski have experienced the damage that this drought has caused from their line of work.

Cook, a farmer for 35 years, saw his crops dried out and damaged. He and his team built irrigation systems to water the crops just enough so that they would survive.

"We saw apples falling to the ground about a week before they should be harvested. They were much smaller than normal." Cook's farm provides "pick your own" crops, including apples, a popular activity in the fall season.

"In areas where we did not have water up until August, we were running [the] danger of losing apple crops and corn fields. This would affect the fall season and activity." This activity includes how much revenue the "pick your own" would bring into the farm.

Like Cook, many farmers experienced the financial burden of the drought this season. Niedzielski and his county office assess the crop loss throughout the state of Massachusetts. Assessments happen every year when farmers struggle, but this year it was expected.

"We first became aware when crops should have been looking good at the beginning of the spring and then the rain never came," says Niedzielski. When the rain still failed to come, farmers began to ask for help and loss assessments began.

"We noted that there was short of \$14 million of crop losses by Aug. 19, 2016," says Niedzielski. "Those numbers are apt to increase as the season goes on."

The director explains that the drought does not only affect the amount of crops grown, but the soil quality, feed for livestock and quality of crops that do manage to grow. With not enough hay harvests, farmers purchase feed for the livestock. With no crops to sell, this becomes a financial burden for many.

"One area that's really severe is with dairy farmers. The input costs are high, so any time there are other stresses it puts farms in jeopardy. Usually these farmers grow their own hay. Because of no hay growth, folks have to use money to buy feed. Eventually, there are bills and no place to go for that. That's why we're here."

Various USDA programs are triggered with a drought to financially support farmers. The state has submitted a disaster declaration, which will initiate an emergency loan programs. This will help farmers, who unlike Cook, cannot afford to build irrigation systems or feed the livestock. There are also forms of crop insurance for fruits and vegetables.

"Here in the state, 22 percent of agricultural sales are all direct market sales," Nieldski explains. This means that 22 percent of agricultural sales in the state of Massachusetts come from local farmers and growers. Buying local products supports these struggling farmers and assists them in purchasing the equipment needed to survive the drought. "It's always important, but especially important in times of need."

Nieldski and Cook both commented that the only concrete solution to the drought is to wait for rain.

"We have to rely on rain and encourage people to conserve water, so that by the end of the season we're not dried up," says Todd Richards, the assistant director of fisheries of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. Richards explains that the more water being used by citizens and farmers, the less that remains in the streams for fish to survive in.

Fishing is another popular activity in the state of Massachusetts. The dried-up streams can affect the population that will return and mate in the spring. Richards explains that the streams will not refill until the growing season is over and the ground becomes harder, allowing the water to flow in streams rather than being soaked into the soil.

With most of the state of Massachusetts in the D3 to D4 drought zone, severe drought to extreme drought, conditions will stay dry. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration predicts 40-50 percent below normal precipitation levels for the end to September to early October.

When the rain does eventually come, it will replenish the soil, save any crops that are left and lastly fill the streams. What areas need the rain first and most?

"There aren't any areas that we aren't concerned about," concludes Richards.