



TCEQ'S DROUGHT PLANNING PAYS OFF

Intra-agency team manages scarce resource

We may reflect on 2011 as the year Texas was scorched. The number of 100+ degree days reached double digits statewide, drought is wreaking havoc on cattle ranchers and farmers to the tune of \$5.2 billion and climbing, normally verdant East Texas cities are calling for restrictions on water use for the first time, burn bans are in effect in all but one county, and wildfires—including a devastating fire in Bastrop county (see page 2)—have burned millions of acres. The governor has issued a disaster proclamation. But, thanks to good planning, the TCEQ is meeting the challenge.

TCEQ Commissioner Carlos Rubinstein is no stranger to water-rights issues. He served as the Rio Grande watermaster and worked on international and domestic water-rights issues for many years. In March 2009, then Deputy Executive Director Rubinstein formed a drought team of experts from around the agency to plan for water shortages that could occur. Under his leadership, the team developed the infrastructure still in use today in what may well become the new drought of record for Texas.

Building on the successes of 2009, the drought team reconvened in March of this year. Communications personnel updated and improved the “Texas Drought

Information” Web page, <www.tceq.texas.gov/response/drought>, which is used as a clearinghouse for information on drought. The water-rights staffers joined the public drinking water people to identify public-water systems using surface water as a sole source.

Taking action before there was a problem, staffers made calls to these systems to encourage them to enact their drought contingency plans to conserve water.



Irrigation is obvious from the air, indicating a possible illegal diversion from the Bosque River.

Texans are no doubt familiar with these plans, though most don't know the name. They usually see a notice in their water

TCEQ photo by Michael Sessions, Region 4-Dallas/Fort Worth

bill or elsewhere that outside watering is restricted to twice a week, or allowed only by handheld hose, or not permitted at all. Public-water systems are required to notify the TCEQ when various stages of their drought contingency plans are activated. This year, they can do so through an easy, online form. Also new this year is a document giving water systems information on monetary assistance that is available from other sources.

News media were contacted with the conservation message as well, including an outreach to weathercasters with materials they could use to spread the word. A drought hotline, 800-447-2827, was reactivated during business hours to answer questions from the public.

In Texas, surface-water rights, except for the Rio Grande at and below Amistad Reservoir, are honored on the basis of age—first in time, is first in right. During periods of drought, a watermaster (in those areas of the state served by one) or the TCEQ executive director (elsewhere in the state) can curtail the diversion of water from junior rights holders at the request of a senior rights holder or holders. This is known as a senior call. As part of the TCEQ's sunset legislation, HB 2694, Section 5.02, clarifies the role of the executive director in managing water rights during periods of drought.

On April 11, 2011, water-rights holders statewide received a letter warning of the possible curtailment of water rights due to unusually dry conditions. So far this year, 11 priority calls leading to curtailments have been made for the Brazos and Colorado rivers and the Llano and San Saba watersheds.

Teams of investigators in non-watermaster areas were trained and equipped to do water-rights investigations. In partnership with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Department of Public Safety, the TCEQ conducted flyovers of the affected areas to spot possible illegal diversions from the air and logged GPS coordinates for further investigation.

Legislators, county judges, county-extension agents, and municipal water

Labor Day Weekend Winds Spread Central Texas Wildfires

The Sunday before Labor Day is one the people of Central Texas will not soon forget. Wildfires ignited and spread in the Spicewood area, turning the Pedernales River into a burning gorge. Fires in the cities of Leander and Cedar Park were reported as well. In the Steiner Ranch subdivision, dozens of homes were lost to fire—officials blame gusty 40 mph winds for sending sparks from a power line into the rustic hill country.

But by far the largest, and most devastating to people, were fires in Bastrop County. Almost 35,000 acres were hit and more than 1,500 homes and two lives were lost. At one point, the fire spanned 16 miles. Bastrop State Park sustained considerable damage: though diligent firefighting saved most of the historic structures, all but about 100 acres of the park succumbed to the fire. A second fire in the county, known as the Union Chapel fire, burned 28 homes.

The TCEQ assisted and will continue to assist jurisdictions affected by wildfires. In the case of the Bastrop fires, the agency performed a wide variety of activities:

- Deployed liaisons to the Incident Command Center.
- Conducted critical infrastructure assessments, and monitored public-water and wastewater systems, working to supply generators where needed.
- Operated a smoke-information hotline, where members of the public could find out about air quality.
- Added links on the TCEQ home page to information on the drought and the wildfires.
- Monitored dam operations in the area.
- Provided guidance for proper disposal of animal carcasses.
- Gave guidance on debris management and authorized temporary disposal sites.
- Sent two teams to do hazmat assessments. 🇺🇸



Some estimates indicate 95 percent of Bastrop State Park burned.

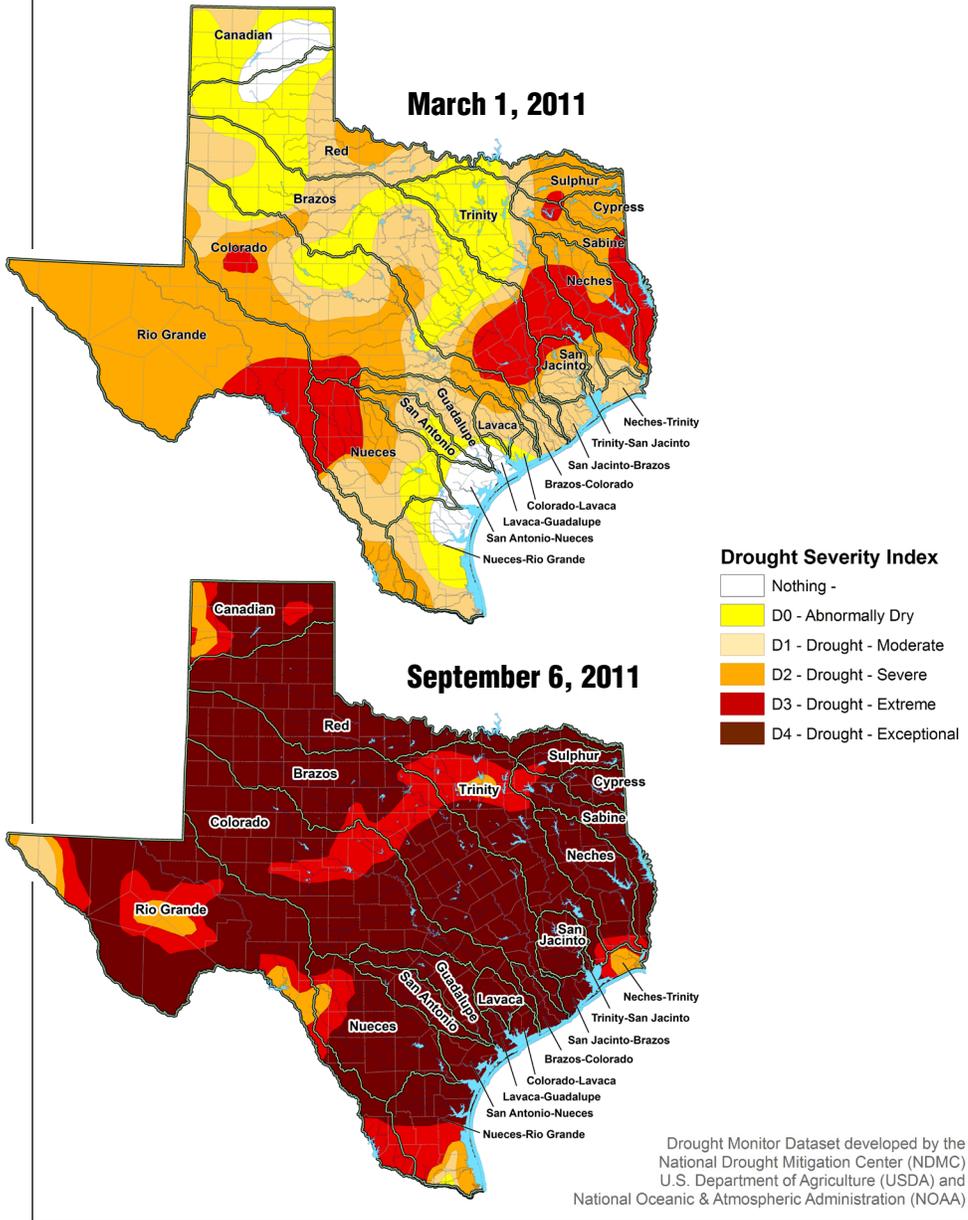


TCEQ photos

TCEQ inspector Zack Lanfear surveys the damage with a DPS trooper. The TCEQ will authorize sites for debris management so that residents can begin again.

Drought Monitor

This illustration shows the impact of the drought on surface water in Texas, comparing early March with early September of 2011.



suppliers were, and continue to be, notified of pending curtailments. The TCEQ works with the governor's Drought Preparedness Taskforce, the Department of Public Safety's Division of Emergency Management, the Texas Water Development Board, and the Joint Information Council to maximize state resources and improve communication.

Where public water supplies may be at risk, the TCEQ works with local officials to identify alternative long- and short-term sources of water, discover possible funding sources, expedite the drilling of wells or laying of pipelines, and better manage day-to-day operations and storage.

There is no substitute for rain. We can't control the weather but with careful planning and cooperation, we can manage until the heavens cooperate. ☔

Additional drought information can be found on the Web:

TCEQ Texas drought information, www.tceq.texas.gov/response/drought

Texas Water Development Board, www.twdb.state.tx.us/data/drought/index.asp

Texas Agrilife Extension Service, <http://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/>

State Water Plan, www.twdb.state.tx.us/wrpi/swp/swp.asp

Go to www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/outlook-1011 to see video of an inspector taking stream-flow measurements and an animation of drought conditions over time.



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