

World

JALine. m

477/89

HIGH QUALITY ORIGINAL

Drought, record heat parch U.S. South

The New York Times

ATLANTA — For a week and a half, it has been so hot across the South that chickens in their sheds, fish in their ponds, cattle in their fields, ancient oaks in their woods and people in their homes have died of heat.

The drought, now the worst in the region's history, has left the earth so dry and hard that cemetery crews have had to soak the ground with precious water to dig a grave.

It has been a complex phenomenon: 10 days of record heat, on top of four months of drought, on top of a farm crisis that is now almost a decade old in the South, dating from the drought of 1977.

In terms of major crops, it has most hurt cotton, peanuts, soybeans, corn and pecans. If steady rains do not come, consumers may notice smaller peaches and nuts in the markets and smaller chickens in the grocery cooler. But with the harvest season for most crops still months away, rainfall in the next week or so could yet rescue the region from much of the misery that now blankets it.

From the air, the red clay and sandy loam of central Georgia stretch away in fields of hot pinks and mustards and shimmering greens, under a sky whose horizon is lost in a baking haze.

In a general way, Albany, Ga., where Bob Hayes farms 688 hectares, marks the southern

boundary of the devastating hot and dry zone. "This year," he said this week, "I have had rain on the east side of the place, but on this side, practically none." His watermelons in one field grew enough to take to market, but 195 metres down the road, his beans and peas burned up.

As Hayes spoke, clouds began to mass behind him, and an hour later, a storm front blew in 10 centimetres of rain and winds that washed powder-dry earth off the fields.

The storms drenched Savannah, to the east, and Wilmington, N.C., to the north, and for the first day in a week, no record temperatures were set across the Southeast. The rains brought hope to some areas. "They'll help in the short term," said Bill Barlow of the National Severe Storms Forecast Center in Kansas City, Mo. But because the rains were scattered, he said, "it's not going to make that much difference."

The immediate effect of the heat has been staggering. The death Tuesday of an elderly Georgia man whose body temperature had risen to 44 degrees brought the number of human fatalities attributed to the heat to seven in this state and a total of 12 in the region. In Georgia alone 750,000 chickens died in a week.

For the farmers, the long-term burden, hard to measure, may lie on the spirit of the rural South. In the last five to eight years in Washington County in northeast Georgia, said Chris

Irvin, president of the George D. Warthen Bank, when there has been enough rain for good crops, the crop prices would not bring a profit. Now, he said, the value of farmland has declined, the majority of the county's farmers have a negative net worth, and they have no crops to sell, no market for their farmland and none for their equipment.

"Agriculture is dead in this county," Irvin said. "One day it may come back, but it will take 20 years."

In South Carolina, the Department of Agriculture said that the heat and drought had devastated the major oat, wheat and corn crops. Because pasture across South Carolina has either failed to grow or been burned, state agriculture officials are trying to find some way to ship hay from the Middle West for the cattle.

Herds in Georgia and other states are under similar stress. "What we've found is that a large number of our farmers are without water," Tommy Irvin, the Georgia commissioner of agriculture, said. "Their ponds have been exhausted and their streams have dried up. And they have no feed for their cattle."

While South Carolina and Georgia seem the most severely affected, Irvin said his surveys indicated that the belt of heat and drought damage also spreads through Alabama, North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and Virginia.



—AP photo

Farmer James Barbour's parched soil in North Carolina