Ferdie J. Deering

FEB 19 1981

Get Ready for Drouth Before It Hits

OKLAHOMANS have not learned to enjoy drouths but we have found that they must be endured occasionally. The present nationwide drouth is a lulu and many areas are up against severe water shortages.

An old, old joke tells of a hillbilly who explained to a stranger that he couldn't repair the hole in the roof because it had been raining lately. When asked why he didn't repair it while it was not raining, the hillbilly replied: "Because it don't leak then!"

That's about the way it is with municipalities and farmers. When a drouth comes they get excited about building reservoirs and getting a cloud-seeding project going right away.

After the first good rain, interest declines as rapidly as surplus water runs downhill. Public officials turn to more popular issues and nobody seems to think it ever will turn dry again.

But it always has. According to Glenn Sullivan, senior vice-president of The Benham Group, an Oklahoma City firm that engineers water systems nationwide, at least 273 public water systems serving 360 Oklahoma communities were under emergency control last year. The number might be larger this year, unless we receive unusually heavy spring rains.

Sullivan displays a cartoon labeled "The Hydro-Illogical Cycle." It begins with an adequate supply of water, resulting in apathy, followed by drouth. When people become aware of the need, they become concerned. Panic may produce action to provide an adequate supply for a time. This results in apathy, until another drouth hits.

Weather experts have been trying to centuries to predict the weather and alter it. Their success is as spotty as showers they sometimes forecast, but progress is being made in weather knowledge.

One popular theory relates our weather to sunspot activity, when magnetic fields within the sun break through, sending immense gaseous plumes into space and a barrage of X-rays into earth's atmosphere.

The basic sunspot cycle seems to be 10 or 11 years and several researchers have correlated this to the Great Plains drouth cycle of 20 to 22 years. NASA has a satellite in orbit to measure energy released by solar flares and try to find out more about sunspots.

A Cornell University scientist recently found a connection between sunspot cycles and severely cold weather, too. Many states are suffering from extremely low temperatures, as well as drouth.

You don't need to be a meteorologist or sunspot expert to observe that dry periods come to the Great Plains about every other decade. The 1890s, 1910s, 1930s, 1950s and 1970s all were on the dry side.

The decade of the 1980s might be a series of wet years, but we are starting with very low water reserves all over the country.

The Oklahoma Crop and Livestock Reporting Service says that since Sept. 1, 1980, the Panhandle and Central Oklahoma have received less than half normal rainfall. Only south central and southeastern counties are close to normal.

If we're smart, we'll start preparing for drouth before it hits!

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