

Our Drouth Still Serious

JOKES about how dry it gets in Oklahoma are repeated everytime we have a long dry spell, but drouth is no joke.

When it doesn't rain, farmers lose crops. Ranchers have to sell parts of their herds as pastures and stock tanks dry up. Municipalities must ration water. Merchants lose business. Pollution is intensified. Government often must implement relief programs.

Oklahoma is in the middle of a drouth belt that reaches from coast to coast and from Canada down into Mexico. The drouth is severe in some areas, and only a few places in Oklahoma have had enough rain this summer to bring even temporary relief.

Many municipalities, including Oklahoma City, have called upon residents to reduce their water usage during the 100-degrees-plus weather. A few have put mandatory water rationing into effect, mainly because of inadequate purification and distribution systems.

Our water supplies are not exhausted largely because of efforts begun in the dust bowl days of the 1930s, when we really did run out of water. Citizens realized just how important water is and started building lakes and ponds for every purpose.

As a result, the state now has dozens of major lakes, plus hundreds of medium-sized municipal and upstream water conservation structures, and tens of thousands of farm ponds. These will help us survive the drouth, although lost crop and livestock

production may run into many millions of dollars.

The temporary respite from the fallout of Hurricane Alicia doesn't alter the long-range forecast of more hot, dry weather for another month, so the total losses may be high.

Nevertheless, Americans need not worry about food shortages, as is the case in other drouth-stricken countries. Drouth strikes all continents intermittently, and this year's worst disaster area is Africa, where millions face the threat of starvation.

War, famine, poverty and incompetent governments add to the woes of some of these nations, few of which produce enough food for their people even in good years. This year, farmers have eaten seed needed for planting and slaughtered breeding stock from their starving herds. Most of the wild animals in Kruger National Park in Kenya have died within the past year, according to reports.

Because Oklahoma has made considerable progress in storing and conserving water, we may be lulled into complacency by the next good rain. It has happened before. However, our state is growing in industry and population. More water will be needed in the future. Now is the time to prepare for greater demand.

It takes years to plan, finance and construct water facilities. Evidence clearly indicates that we will face drouth periodically from now on. We always have.