



Drought

This indicator measures drought conditions of U.S. lands.

Background

There are many definitions and types of drought. Meteorologists generally define drought as a prolonged period of dry weather caused by a lack of precipitation that results in a serious water shortage for some activity, population, or ecological system. Drought can also be thought of as an extended imbalance between precipitation and evaporation.

As average temperatures have risen because of climate change, the Earth's water cycle has sped up through an increase in the rate of evaporation. An increase in evaporation makes more water available in the air for precipitation, but contributes to drying over some land areas, leaving less moisture in the soil. Thus, as the climate continues to change, many areas are likely to experience increased precipitation (see the U.S. and Global Precipitation indicator on p. 28) and increased risk of flooding (see the Heavy Precipitation indicator on p. 30), while areas located far from storm tracks are likely to experience less precipitation and increased risk of drought. As a result, since the 1950s, some regions of the world have experienced longer and more intense droughts, particularly in southern Europe and West Africa, while other regions have seen droughts become less frequent, less intense, or shorter (for example, in central North America).²²

Drought conditions can negatively affect agriculture, water supplies, energy production, and many other aspects of society. The impacts vary depending on the type, location, intensity, and duration of the drought. For example, effects on agriculture can range from slowed plant growth to severe crop losses, while water supply impacts can range from lowered reservoir levels and dried-up streams to major water shortages. Lower streamflow and ground water levels can also harm plants and animals, and dried-out vegetation increases the risk of wildfires.

About the Indicator

During the 20th century, many indices were created to measure drought severity by looking at precipitation, soil moisture, stream flow, vegetation health, and other variables.²³ Figure 1 shows annual values of the most widely used index, the Palmer

Key Points

- Average drought conditions across the nation have varied since records began in 1895. The 1930s and 1950s saw the most widespread droughts, while the last 50 years have generally been wetter than average (see Figure 1).
- Over the period from 2000 through 2011, roughly 30 to 60 percent of the U.S. land area experienced conditions that were at least abnormally dry at any given time (see Figure 2). The years 2002, 2003, and 2007 were relatively high drought years, while 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2010 were relatively low drought years. In 2011, the overall extent of drought was relatively low, but the droughts that did occur were more severe than at any other time since 2000.
- According to the Drought Monitor, more than 64 percent of the contiguous U.S. land area was covered by moderate or greater drought by the end of September 2012. In many portions of the country, 2012 has been among the driest years on record.²⁴

Figure 1. Average Drought Conditions in the Contiguous 48 States, 1895–2011

This chart shows annual values of the Palmer Drought Severity Index, averaged over the entire area of the contiguous 48 states. Positive values represent wetter-than-average conditions, while negative values represent drier-than-average conditions. A value between -2 and -3 indicates moderate drought, -3 to -4 is severe drought, and -4 or below indicates extreme drought. The thicker line is a nine-year weighted average.

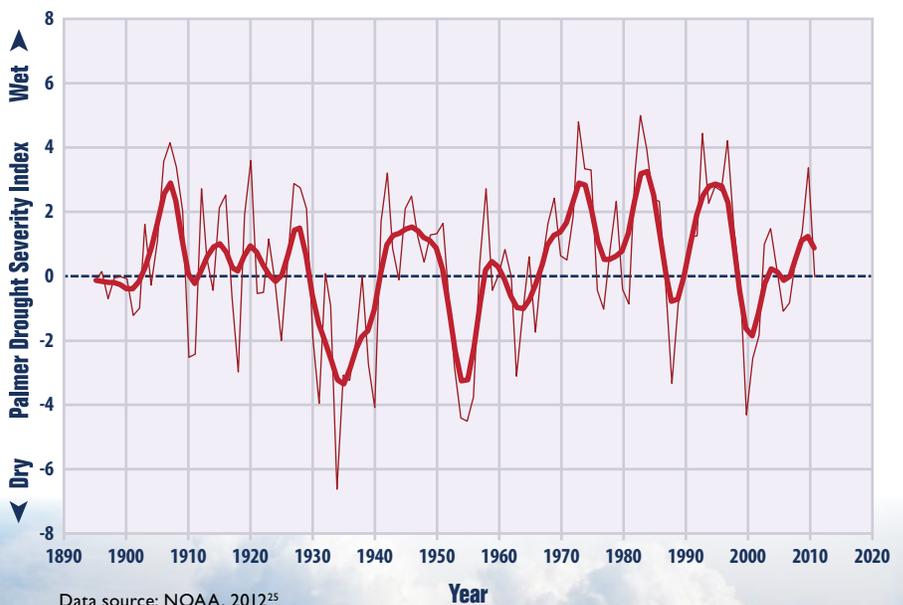
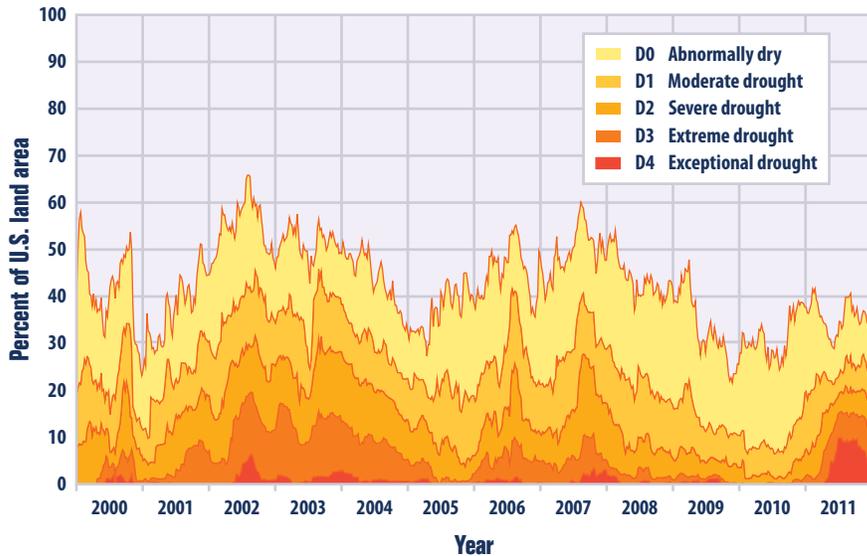


Figure 2. U.S. Lands Under Drought Conditions, 2000–2011

This chart shows the percentage of U.S. lands classified under drought conditions from 2000 through 2011. This figure uses the U.S. Drought Monitor classification system, which is described in the table below. The data cover all 50 states plus Puerto Rico.



Data source: National Drought Mitigation Center, 2012²⁶

Categories of Drought Severity

Category	Description	Possible Impacts
D0	Abnormally dry	Going into drought: short-term dryness slowing planting or growth of crops or pastures. Coming out of drought: some lingering water deficits; pastures or crops not fully recovered.
D1	Moderate drought	Some damage to crops or pastures; streams, reservoirs, or wells low; some water shortages developing or imminent; voluntary water use restrictions requested.
D2	Severe drought	Crop or pasture losses likely; water shortages common; water restrictions imposed.
D3	Extreme drought	Major crop/pasture losses; widespread water shortages or restrictions
D4	Exceptional drought	Exceptional and widespread crop/pasture losses; shortages of water in reservoirs, streams, and wells, creating water emergencies.

Experts update the U.S. Drought Monitor weekly and produce maps that illustrate current conditions as well as short- and long-term trends. Major participants include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the National Drought Mitigation Center. For a map of current drought conditions, visit the Drought Monitor website at: <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>.

Drought Severity Index, which is calculated from precipitation and temperature measurements at weather stations. An index value of zero represents average moisture conditions for a given location, based on many years of observations. A positive value means conditions are wetter than average, while a negative value is drier than average. Index values from locations across the contiguous 48 states have been averaged together to produce the national values shown in Figure 1.

For a more detailed perspective on recent trends, Figure 2 shows a newer index called the Drought Monitor, which is based on several indices (including Palmer), along with additional factors such as snow water content, ground water levels, reservoir storage, pasture/range conditions, and other impacts. The Drought Monitor uses codes from D0 to D4 (see table below) to classify drought severity. This part of the indicator covers all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

Indicator Notes

Because this indicator focuses on national trends, it does not show how drought conditions vary by region. For example, even if half of the country suffered from severe drought, Figure 1 could show an average index value close to zero if the rest of the country was wetter than average. Thus, Figure 1 might understate the degree to which droughts are becoming more severe in some areas while other places receive more rain as a result of climate change.

The U.S. Drought Monitor (Figure 2) offers a closer look at the percentage of the country that is affected by drought. However, this index is relatively new and thus too short-lived to be used for assessing long-term climate trends. With several decades of data collection, future versions of this indicator should be able to paint a more complete picture of trends over time.

Overall, this indicator gives a broad overview of drought conditions in the United States. It is not intended to replace local or state information that might describe conditions more precisely for a particular region.

Data Sources

Data for Figure 1 were obtained from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Climatic Data Center, which maintains a large collection of climate data online at: www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/ncdc.html. Data for Figure 2 were provided by the National Drought Mitigation Center. Historical data in table form are available at: <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/archive.html>. Maps and current drought information can be found on the main Drought Monitor site at: <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>.