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Rain was a godsend, but state still parched

By **Greg Wiles**

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Hawai'i farmers welcomed last week's rains, which helped ease extreme drought conditions that existed for a portion of O'ahu.

But figures from the U.S. Drought Mitigation Center show the wet weather failed to extinguish parched conditions throughout most of the state.

Farmers and ranchers are hoping for more rain to alleviate the dry weather that's resulted in water restrictions in some parts of the state. The figures from the national drought center show more than 75 percent of the state has drought conditions ranging from moderate to extreme.

A year ago, only 14 percent of the state had moderate to extreme drought conditions.

In August, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated the state's four main counties as primary natural disaster areas because of losses caused by drought.

"Although we're getting rain sporadically for the past several weeks, if you look at it from a year- or two-year perspective we are still experiencing drought conditions," said Alan Takemoto, executive director of the Hawaii Farm Federation Bureau. "You can have all the land you want, but without the water the land doesn't mean much."

The drought center said last week's rain provided some relief, with Honolulu receiving almost 40 percent of its year-to-date rainfall during the Nov. 14 to 23 period.

On Kaua'i, Lihu'e's rainfall total jumped by 5.42 inches in the week ending Nov. 23, doubling the 5.07 inches it recorded up until that point this year.

Parts of East O'ahu that were classified as having an extreme drought are now categorized as only having severe drought conditions.

In Waimanalo, Nalo Farms President Dean Okimoto said the recent rain could mean the start of a wet winter. During the drought conditions, he's had to abide by restrictions on water use and make up for the lack of rain by irrigating with water from the City and County of Honolulu.

"We're paying the price for more expensive water," said Okimoto, adding that some farmers elsewhere can't afford the cost and have limited their plantings.

"None of the (water use) restrictions have been lifted."

WATER RESTRICTIONS

Earlier this year, there were mandatory restrictions on the use of irrigation water from the Waimanalo Reservoir, while there was a call for a voluntary 10 percent reduction in water use in Windward areas of the Ko'olau Range.

Elsewhere, farmers in West Moloka'i have had to comply with restrictions on irrigation water from the Kualapuu Reservoir, and on Maui there have been calls for voluntary cuts in water use in some areas.

The drought has hit the Big Island hardest, with officials requesting voluntary restrictions on water use.

A National Weather Service report issued earlier this month said ranchers have reported livestock deaths and severe losses of forage.

It also noted that brushfire danger is "high to extreme" in some areas of Upper Hamakua and North Kona.

The national drought center's maps show a large swath of the Big Island around Waimea as having extreme drought conditions.

EXTREME FOR SOME

In all, the center says 11.3 percent of the state is suffering from an extreme drought. That's down from the week before when it totaled 12.3 percent.

"There are people in Waimea and down in that area that have had a tough time," said Richard Ha of the Big Island's Hamakua Springs Country Farms, a grower of bananas and hydroponic vegetables.

RAIN NUMBERS BELOW NORMAL

2008 rainfall totals through
October at Hawai'i airports

Airport	Rainfall in inches	Pct. of normal
Lihu'e	14.36	48%
Honolulu	4.18	32%
Kahului	3.79	28%
Hilo	90.26	90%

Source: National Weather Service,
Climate Prediction Center

Ha said his operations, centered on Pepe'ekeo, haven't been hit too hard because rainfall is only down slightly and because he has access to stream water. But he said he knows of people who can't plant enough or have been forced to cut back on the number of cattle they raise.

The National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center issued a long-range forecast on Nov. 20, saying its models called for above-average rainfall for the state from January to May.

Takemoto said more needs to be done to insure there is more help than just low-interest USDA loans in times of drought. He said more the state needs more reservoirs and infrastructure.

"One thing about drought, it impacts the plant's production," he said, noting that stunted growth and production can last months or even a year after the drought ends.

"We've got to develop a way to capture these waters."

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