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Storm doesn't mean drought's over

By **Peter Boylan**

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The wet weather was welcomed by farmers and county water boards but a lot more rain for a longer time is needed to alleviate parched conditions throughout much of the state.

Parts of O'ahu and the Big Island have had extreme drought since the summer. More than 75 percent of the state has moderate to extreme drought, according to figures released Tuesday by the U.S. Drought Mitigation Center.

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

"Farmers and anyone who really pays attention to weather conditions knows that this is the time of year to get drought relief," said Kevin Kodama, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service. "We can get a couple of storm systems come by and it may seem like a big change but this is our wet season.

"This morning we had too much of a good thing. When you have this much rain falling in a short period of time, so much of it goes to runoff you have soil erosion problems and it can cause damage to your fields."

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

On Nov. 20, the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center predicted above-average rainfall for the state from January to May.

The national drought center's maps show a large swath of the Big Island around Waimea with extreme drought conditions. Livestock have died and ranchers have lost a lot of forage. The brushfire danger is "high to extreme" in some areas of Upper Hamakua and North Kona.

"We do not want too much rain all at once because we don't want flooding," said Brian Kau, administrator and chief engineer for the state Department of Agriculture.

"We want good rain that soaks the grounds and fills the reservoirs," Kau said. "We are looking at easing (water) restrictions."

Mandatory restrictions on using irrigation water from Oahu's Waimanalo Reservoir were imposed this year and are still in place. There was also a call for a voluntary 10 percent reduction in water use in Windward areas of the Ko'olau Range.

In Waimanalo, Nalo Farms President Dean Okimoto said it's too early to tell if yesterday's downpour hurt crops more than helped.

"It should help with the drought but we're probably going to need a couple more good rains," said Okimoto. "It would be good if we got an inch a day for the next two months."

Farmers in West Moloka'i have restrictions on using irrigation water from the Kualapu'u Reservoir. 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 urging voluntary water restrictions.

Board of Water Supply spokeswoman Su Shin said O'ahu's water supply is mainly groundwater, so it is not as susceptible to evaporation as the surface water that the Neighbor Islands rely on.

The flip side is that yesterday's rain doesn't immediately replenish groundwater.

"We do see immediate reduction in pumpage but that's primarily because people aren't using as much water when it rains. People aren't watering or washing their cars," said Shin.

"The kind of rain we're getting today is not ideal for groundwater re-charge. It's a little too much a little too quickly. The kind of rain we like is a little less torrential over a longer period of time and the ground can soak it up better."

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