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Drought alters farm strategies

Fewer crops in ground, more expensive water squeezes operations

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Moderate to "exceptional" drought conditions have gripped much of the state, leaving firefighters prepping for a potentially busy summer of brushfires and spurring calls for water conservation on the Neighbor Islands.

Farmers are also grappling with the lack of rain and say they're bracing for a tough dry season. "There's a lot of concern right now," said Warren Watanabe, head of the Maui County Farm Bureau. Watanabe grows micro-greens and says he has planted less because of the dry weather. "It's been pretty dry ... and we're just heading into the summer."

Some 76 percent of the state is experiencing drought conditions — compared with 19 percent a year ago — and from March to May, rainfall on O'ahu and Maui was about half of what the islands usually get, according to the National Weather Service. Meanwhile, rainfall for Kaua'i in May was the second-lowest monthly total ever recorded, with just 1.5 inches falling at Mount Wai'ale'ale — normally one of the wettest spots on Earth — compared with an average 36 inches for May.

"The dry season kind of kicked in pretty hard and pretty quickly," said Kevin Kodama, hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Honolulu. He added that the dry weather follows a wet season that included a few spectacular storms, but brought about average — and in some cases below-normal — rainfall levels. That all bodes poorly for those who rely on surface water for irrigation and drinking, including most Neighbor Island households. Already, Central Maui residents are being asked to voluntarily cut their water consumption by 10 percent, and the Maui Department of Water Supply is considering voluntary or mandatory restrictions for Upcountry Maui, where reservoir levels are way down.

On Monday, there were about 73 million gallons in the three main Upcountry reservoirs.

Together, the three can hold about 180 million gallons.

"The levels are dropping," said water supply spokeswoman Jacky Takakura.

And that's particularly concerning, she added, since water consumption spikes in the summer.

Farmers in Waimanalo also rely on surface water for much of their irrigation, and are under a 20 percent mandatory conservation order from the state Agriculture Department for the Waimanalo Reservoir. The 60-million-gallon reservoir was about half full Monday. The restrictions have farmers putting in fewer crops or using city water, which is much more expensive.

"Mother Nature sure could be more helpful," said Ann Yamamoto, executive director of the Hawai'i Farm Bureau Federation, adding that ranchers are also being hit hard by the dry weather. She said by the end of the summer farmers will have a better idea of just how badly the rainfall levels affected their crops. Right now, she said, "it's varied."

Forecasters say it's still unclear just how fierce the dry season will be, but the weather service isn't predicting any significant relief in the short term. Kodama added there's no single weather factor to blame for the lower-than-normal rainfall. Last month was especially dry, though, thanks in part to a persistent system off the Islands that cut off the trade winds.

Neal Fujii, state drought and water conservation coordinator, said the drought conditions will likely persist through summer — even if rainfall levels go back up. That's because the low rainfall levels in May kicked off the dry season early.

"As we go into the summer season, we already have a deficit," he said. "We're not expecting it to improve."

The dry season in the Islands usually runs from June to September.

It's a time of year firefighters dread — when brushfires are almost a weekly occurrence even during wetter years.

Capt. Terry Seelig, spokesman for the Honolulu Fire Department, said firefighters are prepping for brushfires by rechecking their equipment, brushing up on training and stocking up on supplies. The department is also asking residents in brushfire-prone areas to get ready for the dry season by making sure they have an emergency kit in the event they have to evacuate.

Homeowners are also asked to cut back brush from around their homes.

"We ask people to be really vigilant," Seelig said.

From January to June 15, there were about 200 wildfires on O'ahu, Seelig said, compared with 403 for all of 2008.

Meanwhile, a wind-whipped brushfire on Maui over the weekend burned more than 80 acres and caused about \$500,000 in damage to two homes. The blaze in Ma'alaea, whose cause has not yet been determined, started Sunday afternoon and was brought under control about 6:30 a.m. Monday. There were no injuries reported in the brushfire.

Kodama, of the National Weather Service, said the low rainfall levels this year follow drier-than-normal springs or early summers in the three previous years. Four years doesn't make a trend, Kodama said, but he said the situation is worth noting.

"Long term, it may very well be that the normal (rainfall levels) would be dropping," Kodama said.

But there's no way to tell for sure until more annual data can be gathered.

Waimanalo farmer Grant Hamachi, who grows corn and other vegetables, said the spate of dry summers has a silver lining — it means he's better prepared this year for the dry weather.

"I've already been doing things differently because of the dry weather conditions," he said. Those changes include using more city water for irrigation and putting in fewer crops.

For the Honolulu Board of Water Supply, the dry weather is concerning because it could mean higher consumption during the summer. Though O'ahu's groundwater sources are less susceptible to seasonal rainfall changes, the board did say that summer always brings increased consumption that can sometimes outpace what some water stations can handle.

And the hotter — and drier — the summer, usually the more water that's used.

Board spokeswoman Moani Wright-Van Alst said water levels at stations on O'ahu are at normal levels.

And the board hopes they'll stay that way.

"We're always asking people to conserve," she said.