

AS IT IS | Dry Weather and “Dirty” Farming Affect Food Supplies

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is! I’m Anna Matteo!

Today’s “As It Is” is all about farming and food – something we can’t live without. A report shows that industrial farmers may be making growing condition more difficult for themselves.

But first, we talk about the weather. There’s an old joke. When you don’t know what to talk about, you talk about the weather! But, when the weather affects how much you spend on food or if you even have food ... then people actually want to talk about the weather.

And people in the U.S. are talking about California’s lack of rainfall – or drought. Record-low rainfall in that state could affect food prices in America. And like a rock thrown into a pond -- it could have a “ripple effect” on food prices all around the world.

Here’s Caty Weaver with more on that story.

California Drought Will Lead to Higher Food Prices

In the Central Valley of California, farmers are reducing crop size because they do not have enough water. Last year, California had the least amount of rain since officials began keeping records. And it may be just as bad this year.

Reservoirs are areas where water is stored. In California, some reservoirs are empty. The amount of snow in the Sierra Mountains is 75 percent below normal. This mountain snow melts in the spring and fills rivers. The water is used by farmers.

But now, farmers are warning of the possibility of another "Dust Bowl," like the one of the 1930s. Severe droughts and dust storms covered American farmlands and few crops grew.

Farmers in California produce almost half of U.S. fruits and vegetables. Much of it comes from the Central Valley.

Dan Errotabere is a third generation California farmer. He grows tomatoes, walnuts, garlic and other crops in Fresno County. He says the federal agency that controls the amount of water released from dams and rivers has stopped giving him water. He and other farmers say officials are not correctly administering the water system.

"The last couple of years -- dry years, including, coupled with severe environmental restrictions -- has now presented us with a zero allocation year."

Farmers may not be able to plant crops on more than 200,000 hectares of farmland in the Central Valley this spring. Mr. Errotabere will plant crops on just 80 percent of his farmland. He has enough work for only 15 of his 25 workers.

Federal and state officials sometimes reduce the amount of water to farmers even in years with normal rainfall levels. The officials must supply water to the Sacramento River Delta which is home to several endangered species.

Long-term solutions include conservation, recycling waste water and, building “desalinization centers.” These centers remove salt from seawater so it can be used on farms. Farmers say better administration of the state’s water system could also help solve the crisis.

I’m Caty Weaver.

And I’m Anna Matteo. You are listening to As It Is.

Agriculture is, by its nature – dirty. But it is also DIRTY. Industrial agriculture produces a lot of the greenhouse gasses that scientists link to rising temperatures and climate change. And climate change can hurt growing seasons. And that hurts food supplies. So, if industrial agriculture wants more production, it had better clean up its act.

Karen Leggett has more on a report that looks at farming practices and their effect on growing crops.

The Worldwatch Institute in Washington says high temperatures and unpredictable weather are disrupting agriculture in many parts of the world. It suggests ways that the agriculture industry could reduce its own effects on the environment.

The report is called "Innovations in Sustainable Agriculture: Supporting Climate-Friendly Food Production." Danielle Nierenberg from the research group Food Tank was one of its authors.

"Because industrial agriculture tends to be very resource-intensive, it uses a lot of fossil fuels, it's a huge contributor to climate change. Anywhere from 25 to 30 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions come from the agriculture sector. If you look at all the ingredients that really go into making food -- fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotic use, transportation, processing facilities -- all those things are very dependent on fossil fuels."

Ms. Nierenberg says animal production has an especially big effect on the environment. She notes that the amount of meat being eaten in countries like Brazil, China and India is growing. As a result, more industrial animal facilities or factory farms are being built in the developing world. Those big farms need fossil fuel inputs to operate, and they require long-distance transportation, she says, "so all those things can contribute to climate change."

The report recommends six land and water use practices that it says are sustainable. These include growing trees on farmland to reduce soil erosion and planting cover crops to make soil less vulnerable to drought, heat and pests. Ms. Nierenberg says urban farming can help, as well.

“Growing more food in cities can reduce transportation costs. So, urban residents can buy very locally from rooftops or backyards in their communities. So you’re reducing transportation. You’re making a city more green and helping sequester carbon so that it’s not just a concrete jungle, but a place that really supports food production.”

Other recommended practices include recycling wastewater in cities, drip irrigation, and catching and storing rainwater. Another recommendation is to replace chemical fertilizer with animal waste.

I’m Karen Leggett.

And I’m Anna Matteo. And that’s As It Is for today!

Has the weather affected food prices where you live? Have your food bills gone up recently? What about the farming industry in your part of the world? Tell us about it all in our comment section.

And join us tomorrow for another As It Is.