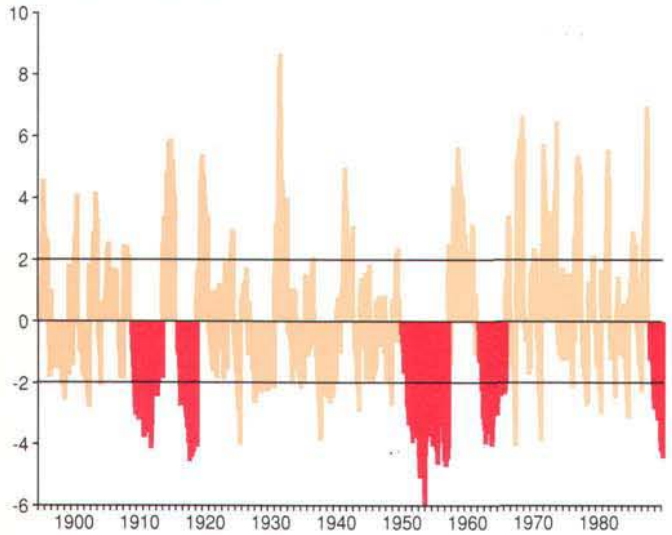
South Texas Drought Remains Severe

Harsh weather in 1989 created many hardships for Southwest farmers and ranchers, particularly early in the year when drought, hail and flooding damaged crops. While conditions improved in most areas, South Texas continues to suffer from drought (see map). Conditions are critical between San Antonio and Laredo, where the now-extreme drought of 1989 prolongs unusually dry conditions that lowered the output and incomes of farmers and ranchers for the past two years.

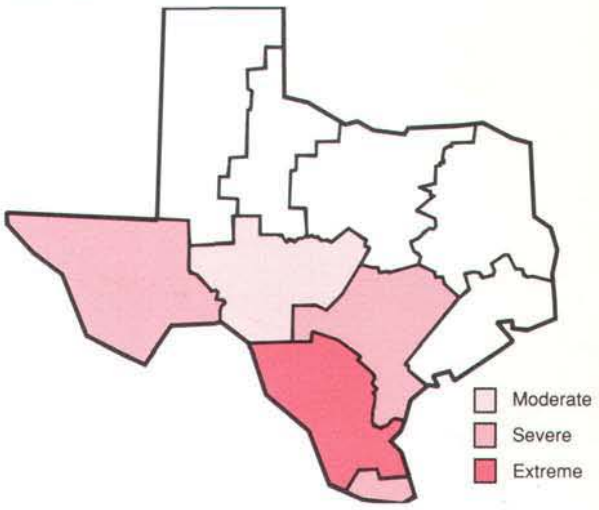
Drought is a normal part of agricultural production. The length and severity of a drought, however, can be abnormal. The chart below depicts the historical soil moisture conditions for the area of South Texas that is now in extreme drought.[1] Soil moisture is measured using the Palmer Drought Severity Index; conditions are "wet" when the index is above zero and "dry" when the index is below zero. The range between 2 and –2 is considered close to normal. As the index shows, South Texas endured several periods of prolonged drought in this century, including a major drought in 1950–57. Droughts in 1909–12, 1916–18, and 1962–65 are also significant because of their length and severity. The current drought, which started in 1988, is the first period of prolonged dryness in 29 years.

Dry conditions virtually halted South Texas agricultural production and are likely to affect spring planting. Dryland producers were unable to harvest crops this year, while irrigated farmers had poor yields and increased costs. Livestock producers are also affected; insufficient water and forage forced most ranchers to liquidate their herds. Most farmers cannot afford to plant next spring without additional moisture, but the region is not likely to receive significant rainfall during the winter.

Palmer Drought Severity Index, 1895–1989
Texas Climatic Division 9



Palmer Drought Severity Index
November 11, 1989



Many agricultural producers temporarily ceased operation while waiting for rain. Although a few producers quit farming permanently, most of them turn to off-farm jobs to supplement their income until agriculture becomes profitable. Disaster assistance in 1988 and 1989 helped agricultural producers cover their costs. Federal disaster funds, however, are subject to increasing political scrutiny, and many farmers are skeptical about the availability of disaster funds in 1990. If the region receives enough moisture this spring to plant, most farmers are affected to purchase crop insurance.

—Fiona Sigalla

[1] Source of data: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service, National Climatic Data Center.

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