

Rainfall easing area's drought: But lakes, aquifer still below normal

BY: SCOTT HUDDLESTON

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What some are rejoicing as the end of a severe drought, others are calling a mere reprieve.

A weak El Niño pattern has fueled spring storms, giving Texas badly needed relief from a nearly five-year drought that had begun to rival a record event of the 1950s, the only one in memory to cause Comal Springs in New Braunfels to run dry. The rain also has provided at least a fleeting moral victory for people near Medina Lake, which has risen 10 feet in the past month, according to the Texas Water Development Board.

Mike Crandall, owner of Wallys Watersports, a water-skiing and kayaking outfitter, eagerly posted photos on social media after a recent deluge sent water rushing at the English Crossing, a point on the Medina River above the lake, which has not been full since 2008. The National Weather Service has reported rainfall since April 1 near the lake of more than 7 inches in Hondo and 12 inches in Bandera County.

“The river is running good, and the lake is coming up,” Crandall said. “Everyone is very, very happy about this.” The lake, with a porous bottom contributing to the Edwards Aquifer, has become the drought’s most striking symbol, offering stark images of a vanishing reservoir. The San Antonio Water System stopped drawing from the lake two years ago, primarily out of concern about water quality issues such as algae growth and carbon compounds.

But recent rains have fueled a public perception, based in part on movies, folklore, lush landscapes and green lawns, that the drought is over. The latest map of Texas released by the U.S. Drought Monitor shows dramatic change from a year ago. The portion of the state in a drought has declined from more than 90 percent to 35 percent.

Todd Votteler, a seasoned water expert and executive manager of science, intergovernmental relations and policy with the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, said much of the rain has not fallen where needed to break the drought.

“If you think in terms of hydrological drought in our region, we have not recovered yet,” Votteler said. “The rain has not really been in the right place to replenish regional aquifers and surface water supplies.”

Votteler said seasonal rains in May and early June could provide help where it is most desired — west of Canyon Lake on the Guadalupe watershed; on the Edwards contributing zone, just north of the recharge zone; and on the Colorado River Basin, upstream of the Highland Lakes, which provide surface water for Austin.

A forecast this month by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts a 70 percent chance that El Niño conditions, a warming of ocean currents in the southern Pacific that often generates rain, will continue in the Northern Hemisphere this summer, with a greater than 60 percent chance that the conditions will stay active in the fall.

Medina Lake was 6.4 percent full Sunday afternoon, up from 2.8 percent a year ago, with more than twice the amount of water, at 16,252 acre-feet, or about 5.3 billion gallons. But it was still

nearly 80 feet below normal. Canyon Lake was 84 percent full Sunday, up more than 3 feet from a month ago but still nearly 8 feet low.

Aside from green grass and a spike in mosquitoes, little has changed in San Antonio during the wet spring. SAWS continues to enforce once-a-week restrictions on watering with sprinklers. The area remains in Stage 2 of the Edwards Aquifer Authority's critical period plan, after having been in Stage 1 from April 29 to May 10. The aquifer's J-17 index well was at 651.9 feet above sea level Sunday, up nearly 14 feet from a year ago but still nearly 14 feet below the well's historical May average.

The J-27 index well in Uvalde, which fluctuates more slowly, was at 827.4 feet Sunday, its highest level in nearly 10 months, but 40 feet below average for May. Uvalde County remains in Stage 5, the most stringent level in the EAA's critical period plan, with a mandated 44 percent reduction in permitted pumping.

Spring showers did not stop the Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy from holding a six-hour conference Saturday in San Antonio to train people to become "water captains" — advocates for water planning. The group, whose sessions are open to everyone, has similar events set for El Paso and Sugar Land in June during a series of meetings in each of 16 water-planning regions statewide.

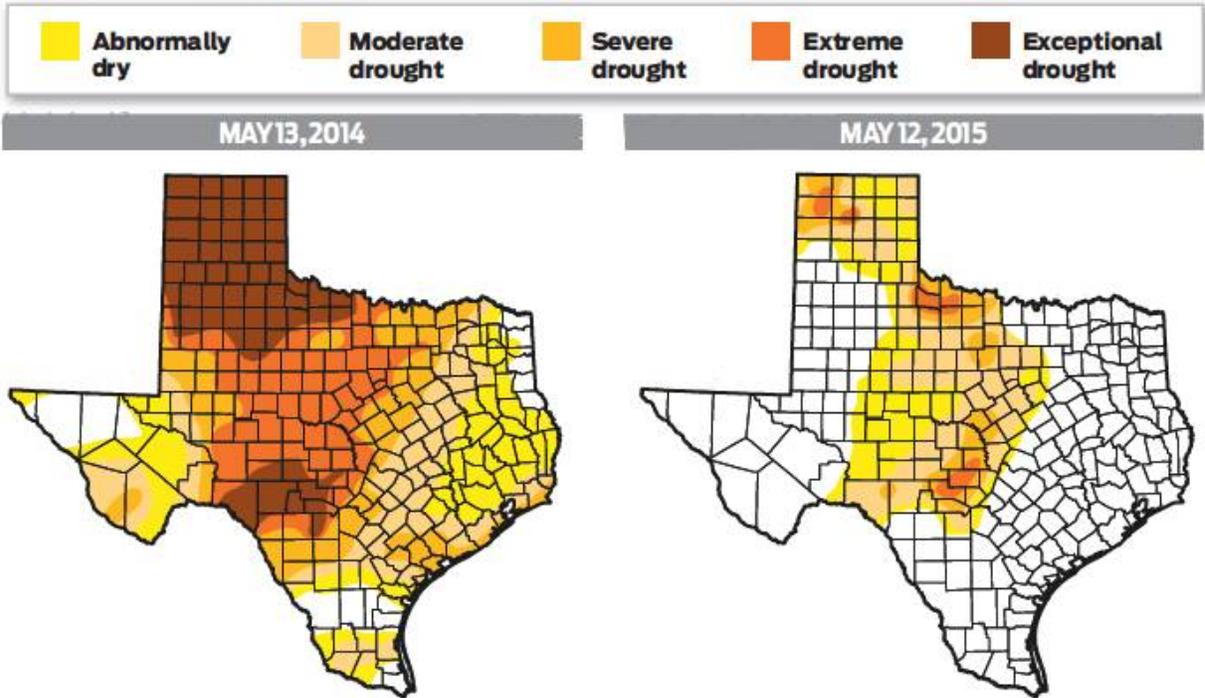
"Texas is a drought-prone state. If we continue to grow, and to use water at the same level, the same way, then we'll eventually run out," said Sam Brannon, outreach and engagement specialist with the center.

"We're building water leaders for the future of our state," he said.

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Drought relenting in Texas

According to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor map of Texas, released Thursday, there no longer are any portions of the state in an exceptional drought, and only 35 percent of Texas is in abnormally dry conditions or worse. That is markedly improved from a year ago, when more than 20 percent of the state was in an exceptional drought and more than 90 percent in dry conditions or worse. Portions of Kerr, Gillespie and Llano counties northwest of San Antonio remain in an extreme drought.



Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

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