AG-ECO NEWS

Vol. 23, Issue 17

Jose G. Peña
Professor & Ext. Economist-Mgmt.

May 30, 2007

Recent Rain Improved the Agriculture Situation
It Will Take Years to Recover from the Severe Drought in Southwest Texas

Jose G. Peña, Professor and Extension Economist-Management

Rainfall in May in Southwest Texas ended at over twice the long term average, bringing the year-to-date cumulative rainfall to about 125 percent of the long term average. The rain has helped green-up the region, improve forage availability and provided an excellent boost to corn, sorghum and cotton which are making good progress. The more recent open, clear weather has helped make use of the recent rain. The agricultural production outlook has improved significantly, providing some hope after the recent severe drought.

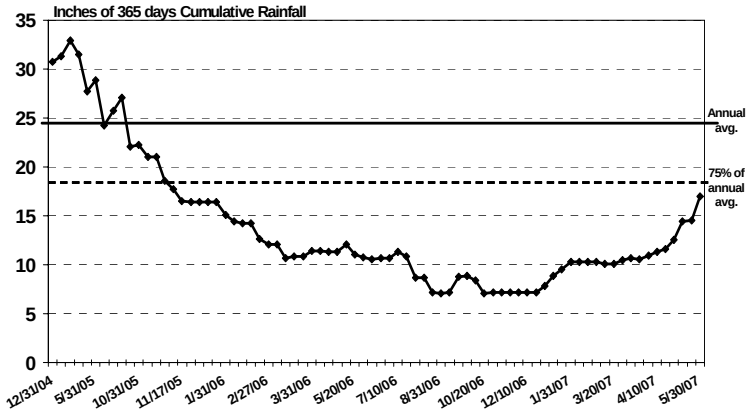
The southwest Texas region, however, remains dry in relation to long term cumulative rainfall and in terms of the impact that the severe drought has had in the degradation of pastures and ranges.

While farming operations are expected to recover, it will take years for pastures and ranges to recover from the recent severe drought, which has lasted close to two years in southwest Texas. Some may not recover without major range improvements. Livestock re-stocking may have to be delayed until 2008.

As measured in Uvalde, the southwest Texas region, entered into drought conditions (75% of average annual rainfall) in mid-November 2005 and has remained in severe drought conditions since then. (See Figure 1). Even with close to six inches of rain in May '07, the last 19 month period from November'05-to-May 30, 2007, was the driest period on record,

with cumulative rainfall at about 62 percent of the long term average.

Figure 1: Rainfall: 365 Day Rolling Cumulative Rainfall[1]
December '04 to May 30, 2007
Uvalde Weather Station



[1]Each data point represents the cumulative rainfall of the previous 365 days.

The rolling 365-day cumulative rainfall since mid-November '05 averaged 11.55 inches of rain, 53 percent below the long term annual average of about 24.34 inches. Yes, that is about 53 percent less rainfall than the average amount which has created the ecological environment, which is dependent on that rain.

Forage remains in relatively short supply. Even with minimum livestock stocking rates, degradation of the forage production situation as a result of the extended drought will continue to have serious implication to the agricultural production situation in southwest Texas. Wildlife population densities are down significantly. This may mean that the currently improved forage situation will provide better nutrition to remaining wildlife. This may mean an improved fawn crop this spring. Wildlife resource management for profit has become the economic lifeline for many ranching operations.

Permanent Change to the Eco System?

In the final analysis, the real effect of any drought is its influence on vegetation and the vegetation's capability to recover. To recover, the vegetation's seed or rootstock must survive a drought. Seed/rootstock must be protected during periods of reduced rainfall, such as severely reducing grazing pressure. Recovery also requires abundant and timely rainfall. In

addition to continued reduced stocking rates, significantly above average rainfall will be needed for several years to recover from the current drought. This appears unlikely, but even with above average rainfall it may be difficult to recover.

In addition, while ranchers were making major range improvement investments through the early 90's, these activities appear to have been reduced significantly. As a result, it appears that the eco-system in a large portion of southwest Texas will be significantly altered and become more economically dependent on wildlife management.