

"Yep, This Year's Drier than '88" Newspaper Article, August 1, 2012

Yep, this year drier than "88

*By Orian Love
The Gazette*

The drought of 2012 has exceeded its 1988 predecessor in terms of both extent and severity.

"This one is worse than "88," State Climatologist Harry Hillaker said Monday.

"You would have to go back to 1936 to find a drought worse than this one," he said.

Hillaker said the month of July, which is shaping up to be the third warmest and fifth driest in 140 years, pushed this year's drought ahead of the '88 drought, which has been the misery standard for most Iowans alive today.

Iowa's worst recorded drought in 1936 was also fueled by a torrid July, the hottest and second-driest in 140 years, Hillaker said.

"Heat makes droughts drier, and droughts make heat hotter," said Brian Fuchs, a climatologist at the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb.

"I do agree that damage from this year's drought will surpass that of 1988," said Fuchs, one of the authors of the increasingly popular U.S. Drought Monitor, which last week showed 53.44 percent of the nation in moderate or worse drought and all of Iowa in severe or extreme drought.

Drought/High pressure dome repelling storms

The high pressure dome that has repelled storms from the grain belt has actually strengthened and could hold sway for another two months, he said.

Iowa's statewide averages for rain and heat in the May-July period were actually slightly worse in 1988 than this year, but the confluence of extreme heat and dryness in July amplified this year's damages, Fuchs said.

"I think this year is worse than 1988. My sense is that it's a lot more widespread, with smaller sections of the state getting enough rain to keep crops in the good or excellent category," said Bill Northey, secretary of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

The weekly USDA crop report, issued Monday, showed 46 percent of Iowa's corn rated poor or very poor, up from 40 percent the preceding week, while the portion of the crop rated good to excellent dropped from 23 percent to 20 percent.

“This drought is definitely going to be worse than 1988,” said Solon farmer Ed Ulch, 68, who started farming with his dad in the 1960s.

The hot sun during the drought of 1988 sears the leaves of a suffering corn stalk.

While some of Ulch’s best corn “looks close to normal,” some of it has no ears, and in a 60-acre river bottom field, “the combine will just be pushing over barren stalks,” said Ulch, a district director of the Iowa Soybean Association.

Similar magnitude

Dave Miller, research director for the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, said the magnitude of this year’s drought is comparable to the droughts of ‘88 and ‘36.

Because farming technology and practices have evolved, “the only way you can compare across time from one corn-growing era to another is by looking at yield deviation from the trend line,” he said. Iowa’s average corn yield in 1988 was about 84 bushels per acre---- about one-third than the 122 bushel per acre trend line, he said.

This year, with a trend line of 176 bushels per acre, Miller said he expects Iowa’s statewide average corn yield to be between 118 and 125 bushels per acre, which would compute to about one-third less than the trend line.

The worst-case scenario, with no more rain during the growing season, would be a deviation from normal of between 38 percent and 40 percent, he said.

Remembering 1983

Wayne Humphreys, 62, who farms near Columbus Junction, said he thinks his corn will make 100 bushels per acre this year, which is better than it did in 1988. “All I had then was hail insurance so I prayed for hail,” he said.

For Humphreys, however, a localized drought in 1983 was worse than either ‘88 or this year. “My soybeans, at 35 bushels per acre, out yielded my corn, at 29 bushels per acre,” he said.

After a 20-year succession of mostly good crops, the drought of 2012 will remind farmers that “Mother Nature still calls the shots,” he said.

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Photo

DROUGHT

Jim Slosiarek/ The Gazette

Dustin Koopman of Koopman Hay & Forage Service cuts corn plants for silage on land farmed by Doug Erger on Tuesday near Newhall. Erger usually only cuts about 10 to 15 acres of silage for feed for his livestock. This year, he converted 50 acres into silage to feed his livestock through the year.

Graphic

Temperature

Year May June July Aug

Statewide average

1988	65.9	74.5	76.1	76.5
2012	65.1	71.6	79.9*	N/A
Norm	60.1	69.7	73.6	71.5

Eastern Iowa Airport

(Cedar Rapids) average

1988	64.5	72.8	77.3	75.9
2012	65.2	71.7	79.3*	N/A

90+ days

1988	1	12	18	14
2012	1	6	19*	N/A

100+ days

1988	0	2	3	4
2012	0	0	2*	N/A

Highest temperature

1988	104 on July 31
2012	103 on July 25

Iowa City average

1988	66.5	75.9	80.2	79.3
2012	66.4	73.1	82.1*	N/A

90+ days

1988	2	19	24	16
2012	3	9	19*	N/A

100+ days

1988	0	4	4	9
2012	0	0	4*	N/A

Highest temperature

1988	104 on July 31
2012	105 on July 7 and 25

*Preliminary through Sunday

Source: State Climatologist
Harry Hillaker

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graphic

Precipitation

(In inches)

Year May June July Aug

Statewide

1988	1.75	1.72	2.23	4.22
2012	3.51	2.99	1.15*	N/A
Norm	4.56	5.02	4.50	4.20

Eastern Iowa Airport (Cedar Rapids)

1988	0.97	1.42	0.52	5.47
2012	1.96	1.28	1.10*	N/A

Iowa City

1988	1.49	1.31	0.90	6.60
2012	3.60	1.73	0.26*	N/A

*Preliminary through Sunday

Source: State Climatologist
Harry Hillaker

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graphic