

## More Drought Talk

Well, I have already written several drought columns in the past few months, but it seems to be about the only, or at least the most frequently, discussed topic wherever I go these days, so here is my current assessment.

Some folks have received a few good rains in the past few weeks while others have suffered the sight of rain clouds passing them by. Such is the nature of Texas thunderstorms. When I was a kid in West Texas, where you could see for miles and miles, it seemed like we saw dozens of rain clouds on the horizon for every one that actually came over us.

Some of you who have received a couple of inches or more may be feeling like the drought is over. I am sorry to say, however, that it's not, not by a long shot. If you got an inch or two or more in the last few weeks, it may certainly have helped save your trees, at least for a while, and it might have even greened up your lawn or pasture grasses. But the soil moisture deficit and plant moisture levels are still a long way from "normal" and there is still a lot of bare ground out there soaking up the sun's rays and cooking the water out of the soil. Springs, seeps and creeks are nowhere near normal flow levels and we don't even know the full extent of the aquifer deficits.

I attended the Gillespie County Land-Use Expo in Fredericksburg a few weeks ago where the drought was very much on everyone's mind. I listened to several speakers and talked to a number of experts I know on land management issues concerning our drought conditions. Here is a summary of what I heard.

The experts seem to all agree that stocking rates should have already been drastically reduced as most all of any useful forage is already gone and continued grazing is severely damaging the range. Yes, it will probably cost more to replace animals when the drought is over, but leaving them on the range now is damaging the ability of the grasses to recover and prolonging how long it will take to recover. It was stated by more than one expert that it may well take two years or more after normal rains return for forage amounts to recover.

David Oehler, Gillespie County Chief Appraiser, told ranchers to not worry about maintaining their Agriculture Tax Valuation, that he was willing to work with ranchers in these extraordinary times. Appraisers in other counties might well do the same.

Some people have trees that have either lost all of their leaves or had all of their leaves turn brown and crispy. No one can say for sure if that means the trees are/will be dead next year. I have a bur oak that I planted several years ago that lost all of its leaves a few years ago in a dry summer only to turn green again later in the fall after some good rains, and it was healthy again until this year. I expect it will recover next spring. If you

can find next year's buds having already formed on the tips of the limbs, the chances of the tree re-leafing next spring are probably better than if it did not form buds. But if you don't find the buds, don't worry, you might just not know what to look for.

I have seen cypress trees planted too far from reliable water lose their needles and then green up again next year. So don't give up on anything just yet. But don't forget to try to keep the ground somewhat moist by watering every few weeks even through the winter if we don't get rains. You want to keep the roots healthy even in the winter.

This winter might be a good time to begin to rethink our ideas about landscaping. Even if it starts raining next week and does so all winter and spring, it doesn't make sense to assume things are going back to "normal" and put in an all-new St Augustine lawn. With either a constant, or, more likely, diminishing supply of water and an increasing number of people wanting it, we need to begin a mind-set that says water, especially for landscaping, will be limited at least at times, maybe for long times. We need to put the dream of a Houston or Dallas suburban green lawn out of our minds.

Until next time...

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