

California Isn't Alone: Historic Droughts Happening Around the World

California is still gripping with the severe drought, but water conservation has been now ordered to deal with the damage exemplified in these aerial photos.

If you live in the United States, especially if you live on the West Coast, you're no doubt well aware of the historic, years-long drought in California, which now has spread across 97 percent of the state with nearly half the state falling into the worst category, exceptional drought.

But as USA Today reports this week, other areas around the world appear to be suffering from drought as bad as California's. Brazil, North Korea, Puerto Rico and South Africa all are in the grip of their worst drought in years or even decades, situations that threaten potentially dire consequences for millions of their citizens.

That's especially in the case for North Korea, which is largely isolated from the rest of the world and grows much of its own food, even though less than 20 percent of the country is suitable for farming.

Together, these droughts demonstrate the extreme measures societies are forced to take when rain doesn't fall for an extended period of time, and the corner they can paint themselves into when they don't manage their water resources effectively.

Africa: Worst Drought for South Africa in 20 Years

Located at the southern tip of the continent and home to some 54 million people, South Africa is facing its worst drought since the early 1990s as dam water levels have dropped about 12 percent from a year ago, just as the country is in the midst of its annual dry season.

The drought has forced farmers to dramatically cut corn and sugar crop

production, and water restrictions “are likely to be imposed” in many parts of the country, according to Athony Turton, a professor at the Centre for Environmental Management at South Africa’s University of the Free State, in an interview with Bloomberg.com.

And because water levels behind the dams are so much lower than last year, toxins and sewage can’t be flushed out of the country’s rivers as quickly as when the water reserves are higher. At the end of this year’s dry season, “we will be in an even more dire situation in terms of available water,” Turton told Bloomberg.

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Conditions are particularly dire in South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province, where the rapidly deteriorating drought situation is forcing the government to deal more forcefully with the water emergency.

“This province is facing a water crisis situation,” said Nomusa Dube-Ncube, a member of the province’s executive council, in an interview with South Africa’s News24. “It is necessary to increase restrictions and implement mandatory restrictions. We are talking about a very serious situation here.”

Water rationing will be implemented, she added, and those who used more than their allotted amount would be fined. “It is not because of the mayors or the councillors,” she added. “It is because we have no rain.”

Asia: North Korean Drought ‘Worst in a Century’

In June, North Korea’s state news agency announced that the world’s most isolated nation is facing its worst drought in a century, a frightening prospect for a country that already regularly experiences food shortages.

Some of its worst-hit areas are its most important agricultural regions, especially for rice. As much as 80 percent of the rice seedlings in the South and North Hwanghae provinces have reportedly dried up, while other provinces important to the nation’s food production also have been “badly affected,” the North Korean news agency said in a statement.

“Water levels of reservoirs stand at their lowest, while rivers and streams [are] getting dry,” according to the BBC translation of the news agency’s report.

As USA Today points out, reliable data on North Korean drought and famine are notoriously hard to come by, thanks to the government's reluctance to release much in the way of accurate information. Still, the United Nations has warned the country could experience mass starvation – as it did in the 1990s – because so many areas affected by the drought produce its food crops.

Caribbean: Worst Drought in 5 Years

From Puerto Rico to Cuba to the eastern Caribbean island of St. Lucia, crops are withering, reservoirs are drying up and cattle are dying while forecasters worry that the situation could only grow worse in the coming months.

In the Dominican Republic, mango farmers are only able to grow less than half of the 100 varieties of the fruit they normally grow thanks to a lack of rain and reliable irrigation infrastructure. In the Jamaican capital city of Kingston, water is turned off to some taps at night and during the day to all residents in nearby Portmore.

The region's drought has become particularly bad in Puerto Rico, where water rationing was expanded last month in several cities including the capital San Juan, where more than 100,000 residents now have their water cut off every other day.

What water the island has left in its reservoirs also is heavily silted from tropical rainstorms in past years, Slate reports, so officials there likely have even less water on hand than they report.

"The capacity of the reservoirs has been severely compromised by sedimentation and lack of maintenance," Miami-based meteorologist John Morales said in an interview with Slate, adding that the island's "'crumbling infrastructure' is producing 'huge losses' of water from innumerable leaks."

South America: Worst Drought in 50 Years For Brazil

Both "unprecedented and predicted," according to a water analyst with the World Bank, the drought that parts of Brazil have experienced since the end of 2014 is the nation's worst in 50 years.

The main water supply in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, is running on emergency reserves. The system is able to deliver only about 40 percent of its normal capacity – before 2014, it supplied about 8,700 gallons of water per second, the World Bank reports. But now, it's delivering only about 3,500 gallons per second, according to data from Brazil's National Water Agency.

At the neighborhood level, the drought has led to fights between neighbors during temporary shutoffs. And in the poorer areas of the city, access to water is far more restricted.

"They have two hours of water on tap — the women don't sleep because the water comes in the early hours of the morning, at around 4 a.m.," Martha Lu, a 43-year-old Sao Paulo resident, told CNBC.

"They don't have water storage, so they have to stay awake because they don't know when the water is coming again," she added. "They stay up to collect it in buckets and try to do laundry, it's terrible."

Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Source: <https://weather.com/science/environment/news/california-historic-drought-world-brazil-africa-korea>

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