

## Farmers sweat out a hot, dry season

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BY ERIK LARSEN  
STAFF WRITER

Summer's perpetually clear skies made last month the third-driest August in New Jersey in more than a century, and combined with often-extreme heat caused premature crops and a smaller yield of vegetables such as corn. And so far, September's been rainless.

The dry spell isn't quite a drought, weather and state experts said, but some farmers said the impact is being felt in their wallets.

"It's not really a drought, but it's what we call a short-term drought," said Bob Sickle, proprietor of Sickle's Market in Little Silver, who estimated he could lose \$15,000 to \$20,000 in revenue this year. "My dad, who is a farmer — he's 77, and he's been farming for 60 years — said he has never seen it as intense as it is now."

The weather forecast doesn't offer much relief, said Mark DeLisi, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Mount Holly. Even with tropical storm Ophelia spinning aimlessly off the Carolinas on Monday, chances were only 30 percent to 40 percent that New Jersey would get any rain by the week's end, he said.

If rain doesn't come, the toll on crops could rise, and the cost of irrigating crops will rise, too, some farmers said.

The high cost of diesel fuel used by many farmers to operate irrigation systems is an additional hardship, explained Pegi Adam, a spokeswoman with the New Jersey Farm Bureau. Doug Kauffman of Kauffman's Farm in Howell reported that diesel has gone from \$1.89 per gallon in June to \$2.49 today, she said.

### Reservoirs in good shape

The State Drought Task Force is monitoring water levels, said Elaine Makatura, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Protection. So far, the reservoirs in North Jersey and the ground water in the southern part of the state are not affected.

However, the DEP is advising citizens to use common sense in use of water, she said.

"There's different types of drought," said David Robinson, state climatologist with Rutgers University. "The one the state would be concerned about is a hydrologic drought, a shortage in drinking water. I concur; we aren't in that type of drought.

"But there's agricultural droughts, and there's droughts that can be associated with a danger of forest fire," he said.

On Monday, the state Forest Fire Service issued a variety of new restrictions on open fires, depending on location, Makatura said. The threat of fire to southern and central New Jersey was listed as "very high," the second-highest level on the fire danger rating system.

Last month, an average of 1.63 inches of rain fell on the Garden State. There has been no rain in September. In August 2004, the state averaged 4.65 inches, with 5.8 inches last September, Robinson said.

Although the state might feel the effects of Ophelia on Thursday, DeLisi said, but "it's certainly not likely. Our forecast is mid-70s on Friday. . . . As long as you don't mind the fact it's not raining, it's nice weather."

Kevin Donald, executive director of the Brick Township Municipal Utilities Authority, said despite the dry weather, the agency's new reservoir, which holds a billion gallons, is in good shape.

The authority is always concerned about "water quantity and water quality," Donald said, adding the effects of the dry spell are "not noticeable yet."

### **"We keep pumping"**

Charlie Hallock, who owns Hallock's U-Pick Farm/Greenhouse in Plumsted with his brother, Douglas, said their farm is in good shape, given the extensive heat and dry spell.

But it has come at a price to their bottom line.

"We're open all the way to Thanksgiving," he said. "We keep pumping (water), but it's definitely going to take its toll on (our) gasoline costs. That's what's hurting. We've got diesel pumps running all day long."

"The thing about farmers in New Jersey is they're very good at irrigating," said Lynne Richmond, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Agriculture. "But it cuts into their profit. They're not reporting huge problems. I'm sure here and there, they're feeling some sort of an impact."

Richmond said the real problem for farmers this growing season was the heat.

"The heat accelerates the ripening," Richmond said. "A farmer might plant in one part of the field one week and in another part the next" as a way of stretching out a particular crop over the course of the season.

But the excessive heat will cause the crop to grow faster, making the season shorter and producing a smaller harvest.

Despite the problems, this year yielded crops often better tasting than crops of previous years.

"The peach crop and the tomato crop — the quality is excellent," she said. "We had a wonderful growing season, and we have good quantity."

*Erik Larsen: (609) 978-4582 or [elarsen@app.com](mailto:elarsen@app.com)*

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