

OUR VIEWPOINT: Recent rain doesn't much affect water supply, drought

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Be cause the area has seen rain in recent weeks — enough that the Brazosport area is almost 3 inches above average for this year — it's easy to understand why some folks might scoff at hearing reports Texas remains in the midst of one of the worst droughts in state history.

But much of the state does, in fact, rem ain in different stages of drought.

The water supply situation isn't determined by weather that happened just last week or even last month, nor is it affected much by weather patterns in our particular neck of the woods near the mouth of the Brazos River.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Drought Monitor map for March 24, about 51 percent of Texas remains in some level of drought. About 25 percent of Texas is in "severe" or worse drought conditions, and 14 percent of Texas is in "extreme" or "exceptional drought." Over the past week, the drought map shows heavy rainfall did somewhat reduce dry conditions in central and South Texas, but portions of the Panhandle were downgraded even worse as temperatures hit the 80s with little to no rainfall.

Before getting too giddy about recent rain here, it's worth noting the intense heat of a Texas summer is on its way. Also, major reports last year by the Dallas Morning News, Texas Tribune and other publications consistently painted a grim overall picture, with prospects likely — but not certain — for continued, long-term drought in Texas.

Population growth coupled with drought have been a drain on waterways, including the Colorado and Brazos rivers. This has set up potentially epic water battles between various regions, towns and economic interests — including farmers, ranchers and companies like Dow Chemical — that depend on the rivers for their viability.

Dr. John Nielsen-Gammon, a climatologist and a professor of Atmospheric Science at Texas A&M University, says our current drought pattern — which he said is ultimately linked to the interaction of warm and cool waters between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans — might not end anytime soon. "We might still be in drought for another 10 or 15 years," Nielsen-Gammon said, likening that potential situation to the devastating Dust Bowl of the 1950s. He also points out this is not a sure thing, noting, "Unfortunately we don't have the ability to forecast the ocean patterns say two or three years in advance, so the whole pattern could be over in five years or it could last 15 or more."

As it stands, however, there is no pending truce in the battle for water resources. Brazoria County business and political leaders already are acting to protect local interests. The recent formation of the Lower Brazos River Coalition, led by Brazoria County Judge Matt Sebesta, is this region's response to efforts by numerous organizations in the upper basins seeking to limit or reduce the Brazos River's flow downstream.

With water demand expected to triple in the next 50 years, Sebesta said the Lower Brazos River Coalition

aims to ensure local concerns are considered by lawmakers in Austin.

“If some legislation is pushed forward that threatens the flow of the river, this coalition will go to Austin and meet with the legislators, meet with the TCEQ, or meet with anyone, to educate them on how important it is to keep water flowing in the Brazos River,” Sebesta said in a February Facts report.

Area residents should keep in mind the next time we happen to get a torrential downpour, it doesn't spell the end of the state's water woes or ongoing drought. Even if the global ocean weather pattern cycles suddenly shift gears and lead to plentiful precipitation and an eventual end to drought, many of our water struggles likely will remain at the forefront because of sky-rocketing demand.

With the prospect of continued drought and stakes high, water fights are shaping up to grow quite intense. Lower Brazos River Coalition member Kirby Brown, who is a conservation outreach specialist with Ducks Unlimited, offered up an old saying that perhaps best describes the looming showdown: “Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting.”

“That's the most important thing to take home with you today,” Brown said. “We're back in the Wild West.”