Acadiana farmers need rain soon

By KATY SMITH
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It wouldn’t be surprising to find Acadiana farmers performing rain dances or praying in their fields during the next few weeks. Their crops need rain, and soon.

So far this year, only 9.3 inches of rain have dampened Acadiana, said meteorologist Dick Faurot. That is less than half the amount that fell during the same period in 1985, he said.

Rain now wouldn’t help the winter wheat crop but could prevent serious damage to other crops such as corn, soybean and grain sorghum. Rice farmers, however, are equipped to handle the drought with irrigation systems.

“All crops are being affected,” said James Trahan of the Soil Conservation Service. “We need some rain soon. If we get some rain pretty soon, the effect overall might not be that bad.”

“Probably the worst effect it has had so far has been on the winter wheat,” Trahan said. Yields from the wheat harvest starting soon are expected to be low, but it is too early to tell by how much, he said. Hay bales have also been less than usual, he said.

At least two inches of rain are needed in the next week to prevent much damage to corn and to allow the planting of soybeans, said Russell Guarino, a county agent. The crops also need five to six inches of rain during May for healthy growth, he said.

“But, we don’t want it all in one day,” Guarino added.

A good widespread rain, however, may not be in the works, said Faurot. Many storms with the potential to bring rain have been steered away by upper level winds, he said, adding that those which did come didn’t drop the rain which was expected.

The last good rain was April 28 and the one before was April 20, Faurot said Thursday.

Rainfall in April, however, totalled more this year than in 1985, he said. Acadiana received 1.7 inches compared to 1.2 inches in April 1985, which was also unusually dry.

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Some years it’s too much at one time and some years it is not enough,” Trahan said. Last year’s soybean crop was almost completely lost due to heavy storms just before harvesting, he said.

Rainfall needs to be spread over the growing season, Trahan said. Some farmers have delayed planting of soybeans in hopes that it will rain, he said.

“It may cause some shifts in acreage between crops,” Trahan said, adding that some fields used for corn or grain sorghum may be used for soybean.

The effect of low rainfall is two-fold, Guarino said. The plants’ growth is stunted and they are placed under stress, he explained. That leaves them more susceptible to insect damage.

“So far, we haven’t run into any major problems with insects in the corn,” the county agent said. But, St. Landry Parish is having problems with green stink bugs, 85 percent of which survived this year’s mild winter, he said.

Rainfall is also “critical” for corn in early June when the ears are forming, Guarino said. Without the rain, the ears don’t fill out, leaving the farmer with “shucks and a cob,” he explained.

Although there was a mild winter this year, two freezes came at the worst time for Louisiana fruit growers, Guarino said. The March 22 freeze caught many trees in bloom, especially peach trees, he said.

Guarino added that trees with fruit which were already set escaped damage.

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