Temperature changes create critical situation for La. farmers

SHREVEPORT (UPI) — A hot, dry spring following on the heels of a record cold winter has withered crops in northwestern Louisiana, and one agriculture spokesman said Friday that the situation in his parish is critical.

Hardest hit by the high temperatures are hay farmers, who report up to a 60 percent decrease in production.

Don Bernard, executive director for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in Bossier Parish, said the situation there has reached a critical stage.

"In a normal hay-growing season, farmers should have just completed their second cutting and (be) getting ready for their third," he said. "Most have had only a one-half cut, and some haven't even had a cutting yet."

A Benton hay farmer said he has rolled only 60 bales of hay, compared to 240 in a normal spring. Another said he had harvested 850 pounds of hay per acre this spring, compared to normal production of 3,900 pounds.

And the forecast for rain is not good.

Rainfall in July is .44 inch below normal, and total rainfall for the year is 1.37 inches below normal, said National Weather Service spokesman Ernest Ethridge.

Chances for a "widespread, generally good" rain are poor, he said. But rain received late last month probably saved farmers $20 million to $30 million, Ethridge said.

The withering heat also has caused an increase in agricultural pests in Caddo Parish, said Associate County Agent Marion Ferris. Farmers also have complained of a decrease in cattle weight gain and poor growth in cotton and soybeans.

The problem could mean higher beef prices for consumers if farmers are forced to purchase hay they usually grow themselves to feed cattle.