

**E&E: The energy and environment information source.**

**Start a trial now!**

[E&E Home](#) | [About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Start a Trial](#) | [Subscribe](#)

[ClimateWire](#) | [E&E Daily](#) | [Greenwire](#) | [E&ENews PM](#) | [E&ETV](#) | [Land Letter](#) | [Reports](#)

**E&E PUBLISHING, LLC**



**SEARCH:**

## I. **DROUGHT: Europe braces for serious crop losses, blackouts as record dry season persists** (*ClimateWire*, 06/13/2011)

Jeremy Lovell, E&E European correspondent

*The first of a continuing series.*

LONDON -- One of the driest spring seasons on record in northern Europe has sucked soils dry and sharply reduced river levels to the point that governments are starting to fear crop losses and France, in particular, is bracing for blackouts as its river-cooled nuclear power plants may be forced to shut down.

French Agriculture Minister Bruno Le Maire warned this week that the warmest and driest spring in half a century could slash wheat yields and might even push up world prices despite the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's predicting a bumper global crop due to greater plantings.

### SPECIAL SERIES



An occasional series on the severity of droughts around the world and their economic, social and political impacts.

France has pledged hundreds of millions of euros in aid to its drought-stricken livestock farmers, who have watched feed supplies dwindle and prices rise. Water restrictions are in place in more than half of the country's administrative regions or departments.

"The situation is serious for French farmers. We wanted to act swiftly and on a large scale," Le Maire told reporters last week.

And the French government has set up a committee to keep an eye on the country's electricity supply situation and monitor river levels, as 44 of the 58 nuclear reactors that supply 80 percent of France's electricity are cooled by river water.

The problem appears to be not that the reactors might overheat because of the lack of water but that the depleted rivers might overheat, creating ecological havoc, when the water returns to them after cooling the reactors.

The abnormally low rainfall and high temperatures -- similar in northern Europe to the major drought of 1976, but actually worse in France -- have also hit hydroelectric power availability and output in France.

### Rainfall down 40-80%

The Geneva-based World Meteorological Organization said last week that between February and May of this year, rainfall over Europe as a whole ranged from 40 to 80 percent of the long-term average from 1951 to 2000, and in many parts of western and central Europe it was even below 40 percent.

Between March and May, the outcome was even lower, with France, Germany and southeastern England the worst hit.

Up to now, 2011 has been one of the 10 driest years in Switzerland since 1864, while in France, January to April was the driest period since 1975. In Germany, April this year was one of the 10 driest Aprils since 1881, WMO said. Springtime in Germany, it added, was the driest March-to-May period since 1893.

-  [Email this Story](#)
-  [Print this Story](#)

The preceding winter 2010-2011 was very dry in western Europe, causing very low soil moisture in March and April. This, coupled with the warmer-than-average temperatures, put major water stress on plants, and in particular, agricultural crops.

"This aggravated the water deficits compared to average seasonal conditions. Agriculture was highly affected in western and central Europe; the growth of crops lagged much behind usual conditions," WMO said.

Germany, which produces some 25 percent of the European Union's oilseed rape -- a major source of oil and animal feed as well as biodiesel -- expects to see the drought slash output by more than 20 percent.

### German river levels lowest in a century

Some three-quarters of oilseed rape goes into the country's biodiesel industry -- the biggest in the 27-nation bloc -- leaving it critically short of feedstock and either forcing imports or cutting production, with a consequent knock-on effect on the country's and the European Union's efforts to cut climate-changing carbon emissions.



A mooring buoy for a boat resting on the bottom of Lake Constance in Switzerland in May, when evaporation dropped the level of the lake to a near-record low. Photo courtesy of [Flickr](#).

And while there has been some rainfall recently, helping raise water levels on the river Rhine -- which acts in effect as a major north-south watery superhighway for all manner of goods, including food, manufactured products, chemicals and fuels to and from Europe -- WMO said water levels in most German rivers were the lowest at this time of year for about a century.

The lack of water made the region's forests super-dry, triggering wildfires in parts of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In Germany, with vast tracts of forest, the Forest Fire Danger Index hit its highest possible level.

WMO said the abnormal weather was caused by a persistent ridge of high pressure over western and central Europe, blocking more normal patterns of rainfall and temperature. "This situation is climatologically a very stable constellation, but it has persisted for an unusually long time," WMO said.

### A parched breadbasket

In the United Kingdom, where the parched southeast -- the country's breadbasket -- has received some welcome rain in the past week or two, it has been nowhere near enough to correct the water deficit after the driest March since 1953.



The road to the Netherlands town of Hoogwater (which means "high water" in Dutch) hasn't seen rain for weeks. Photo courtesy of [Flickr](#).

"The recent rain has made very little difference -- if any at all -- agriculturally, simply because when the ground gets as dry as it has been, when you do get some rain it simply runs straight off what in effect is like a concrete surface," said Met Office spokesman Barry Gromett.

"While it will eventually find its way into some sort of reservoir ... I wouldn't have thought it was significant really in terms of water resource. When you get to a certain state, you have to look to redress the balance. When you have been so far below average, it is sensible to assume that you have to make similar sorts of gains above average for similar periods of time," he told *ClimateWire*.

On Friday, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs declared East Anglia to be in drought and said large parts of Wales, the Midlands and southwest and southeast England were on the brink of drought. It has convened a summit of farmers, water authorities, municipal bodies and environment agencies to draw up plans of action.

At the same time, water authorities in London urged people to conserve water, while in the Midlands, people were warned they could face usage restrictions such as lawn watering bans.

### ***Want to read more stories like this?***

E&E is the leading source for comprehensive, daily coverage of environmental and energy politics and policy.

[Click here](#) to start a free trial to E&E -- the best way to track policy and markets.

---

Advertisement



---

[E&E Home](#) | [About](#) | [Start a Trial](#) | [Get E-mail Alerts](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Staff Directory](#) | [Reports](#) | [Public Site](#) | [RSS](#)



[ClimateWire](#) [ENVIRONMENT & ENERGY DAILY](#) [Greenwire](#) [Land Letter](#) [E&ENEWS PM](#) [E&ETV](#)

The Premier Information Source for Professionals Who Track Environmental and Energy Policy.  
© 1996-2011 E&E Publishing, LLC [Privacy Policy](#) [Site Map](#)