

The chain reaction brought on by a drought can go on for years

Hurricanes, tornados, fires and floods bring up frightening images of natural disasters in our minds. These phenomenons generally come on suddenly and with alarming intensity. However, one of the natural disasters we are now facing isn't one that generally comes to mind – drought. That's probably because it doesn't come on with fierce power and abrupt force. Drought comes on slowly and over a period of time. However, it does have impacts that can cause chain reactions over time.

According to the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, drought is an extended period of months or years when a region notes a deficiency in its water supply. Generally, this occurs when an area receives consistently below average precipitation. For most regions, drought is a normal, recurrent feature of the climate.

An interesting thing happened the other day that initiated this article. Erin McCarta, Lakes Management Assistant, mentioned that even though this year we have had more rainfall than last year at this time, we are in a drought. I asked myself, how can that be? By May 2006, we had received 3.34 inches of rain, while 2007 totals for year to date rainfall showed 5.62 inches. So, if we have been getting more rain this year than last, why the drought?

Even though rainfall totals in 2006 were among the driest on record for east central Florida, there was no drought that year. Remember back to 2004/2005 – we had several hurricanes which brought lots of rain. So even though we didn't get much rain last year, there was plenty of water in the lakes and in our reserves.

Since water we receive from rainfall replenishes the supply that we have available, its all an issue of supply and demand. Our water is supplied from underground aquifers, lakes and reservoirs. As the rain continues to fall, it constantly replenishes the supply. However, without the rain, the supply diminishes and the result is a water shortage.

Humans play a role in the drought process as well. We require water to live and in drought situations we must reduce our use so that there is enough available to meet our basic needs until rainfall amounts return to normal. This situation may cause stress in some as lifestyles may need to be adjusted. In addition, many recreational activities may not be available, such as fishing and boating.

The consequences of drought can be devastating to the economy. Farmers may lose crops or produce lower yields than usual and ranchers may lose livestock. Businesses such as the fishing and boating industry may have difficulty selling their goods as will those who depend on agriculture, such as farm machinery producers.

The environment is also impacted in many ways. As you know, Florida is experiencing a multitude of wildfires right now mainly because the vegetation is so dry. Wildlife may not have enough drinking water or food because their water source has dried up. In some cases, destruction of fish and wildlife habitat has occurred. Erosion is more likely as the wind blows the dry soils. Wetlands may be damaged or even destroyed in many instances. Drought conditions also lead to increased growth of algae in lakes and ponds.

Even though drought doesn't come upon us suddenly and with deadly force, you can see that the effects are far-reaching. We must all do our part to conserve the water we have and do the best we can until the rains return.