

AUSTIN AMERICAN STATESMAN:

Mother Nature is top story of 2013 with drought, flood and more drought

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As the sun rose on Halloween morning, Jo Kar Tedder's eyes and her TV were telling strikingly different stories.

On TV, a storm was dropping such torrential rains that Onion Creek washed into 1,000 homes in an epic flood complete with helicopters plucking people from flooded houses, residents hacking through their roofs and creeks swallowing entire neighborhoods. Five people died.

The flood capped Austin's wettest October on record. Yet 80 miles to the northwest, the northern end of Lake Buchanan was still virtually empty, as Tedder, president of the Central Texas Water Coalition, noted from her porch while the dark clouds passed by. She said the weather has been so eccentric that even when nearby rainfall is being measured in feet, she and other lakeside residents find themselves "excited when it rains enough to measure by the tenths of inches."

Two years after extreme drought contributed to catastrophic fires in Bastrop County, the weather in Central Texas in 2013 again demanded our attention with a display of forces powerful, bizarre and worrisome, making it the American-Statesman's story of the year.

"I would say this year had everything our Central Texas climate offers up, rolled into one — drought, flood, heat wave, freezing cold and ice," KXAN meteorologist Jim Spencer said.

Halloween is the day that will linger longest in the minds of many Austinites.

What started as heavy rainfall in the dead of night swelled Onion Creek from its normal depth of about 5 feet to more than 40 feet. Creek-monitoring sensors failed, and the call volume overwhelmed the 911 switchboard; some residents complained of being put on hold for hours or calling numerous times without getting through. The city and county tagged about half the swamped homes unsafe or dangerous. In Central Austin, the Stevie Ray Vaughan statue at Auditorium Shores was up to its waist in Lady Bird Lake.

It was the city's worst flood in more than 30 years, since the one on Memorial Day 1981 that killed 13 people.

It was also the second October flood, after three-quarters of a year that brought yellow-brown lawns and shrunken lakes. The other flood, on Oct. 12-13, was brought on by heavy storms, damaged 107 homes and structures, and led Austin City Limits Music Festival organizers to take the unprecedented step of canceling the final day of shows.

In some ways, it was typical Central Texas weather: drought interrupted by flood.

That propensity can be traced to a topographical rise that runs roughly parallel to Interstate 35 from Fort Worth to San Antonio. The Balcones fault zone uplift traps or slows rainstorms that brew over the Gulf of Mexico and churn their way north. As rain falls from the stalled clouds and collects on the ground, the lift and tilt of the Hill Country send it rushing toward Austin.

To the dismay of many, the rains wreaked havoc while generally avoiding the place they were most needed: the parts of the Hill Country that flow into the Highland Lakes.

"We will end the year in Austin drought-free, with 41 inches of rain — 7 inches above normal," said Spencer, the KXAN meteorologist. "But, just west of the city, from Lake Travis across the Hill Country, severe to extreme drought conditions continue."

The wet weather has helped a little in the Hill Country; lakes Buchanan and Travis, which supply much of Central Texas' water, are now 38 percent full. That's up from 33 percent in late September, a level that is among the lowest on record. Lake Travis dipped to within five feet of its lowest-ever point of 614.2 feet above sea level; Buchanan dipped to within two feet of its lowest level.

As a result, Lake Travis' Sometimes Islands have become a more or less perpetual feature. Businesses such as Carlos'n Charlie's restaurant closed. At times the Colorado River came perilously close to not flowing at all in the north end of Lake Buchanan, where residents drove around the lake bed in off-road carts and hacked their way through underbrush.

In the fall, city of Austin water officials began publicly speculating about the lakes running dry — an admittedly unlikely scenario that would devastate the region’s economy.

The weather exacerbated tensions between the Lower Colorado River Authority, which manages the Highland Lakes, and its customers, including the city of Austin and lakeside residents and businesses, many of whom said poor planning made a bad situation worse. In particular, they blamed the LCRA for releasing water from the reservoirs in 2011 to rice farmers living along the coast.

The drought led to a major political shift this year. In November, the LCRA board decided to cut off the rice farmers’ supply of reservoir water for the third year in a row, saying the \$55 billion Central Texas economy could not be endangered to the benefit of the \$80 million to \$100 million coastal economy.

It was odd to many, hearing talk of drought-related water shortages as record rains fell. But this fall was odd. For instance, temperatures dropped from a tanktop-friendly, near-record high of 85 degrees on Dec. 3 to a put-a-sweater-on-the-dog stretch of freezing and near-freezing days that started Dec. 5.

The lake levels, a concern in 2013, could become an even bigger worry in 2014. If the region hits the worst drought on record — which probably happens if the lakes dip below 30 percent full — the LCRA, per its state-approved water management plan, will require all of its customers to cut back on water use 20 percent. Austin will probably be exempted because of its aggressive conservation efforts, though city officials say there are more ideas in the works along the lines of the water system feeding Roy G. Guerrero Colorado River Park, which uses treated effluent from sewage plants.

Will the region hit the drought of record?

LCRA forecasts say that if the region receives average rainfall in the next few months, the lakes could be as much as 47 percent full on March 1. But if the region turns dry again, lakes Buchanan and Travis could dip to 33 percent full on March 1, with an entire Central Texas summer still to come. Spencer said computer models are giving even odds that precipitation will be above or below normal.

The federal Climate Prediction Center’s Seasonal Drought Outlook predicts the drought will “persist or intensify” in the drought-stricken places just west of Austin and across the Hill Country, Spencer said. The lakes, in other words.

“Looking out long term,” Spencer said, “a warmer than normal spring and summer is forecast for all of Texas, which, if correct, means another brutal summer lies ahead.”



A boat is high and dry in the Sandy Creek Arm of Lake Travis in Jonestown on Aug. 30.

http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/mother-nature-is-top-story-of-2013-with-drought-fl/ncXSF/?icmp=statesman_internallink_textlink_apr2013_statesmanstbtomystatesman_launch