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Drought imperils second-home markets, prices

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—At least with a flood, Noah could escape on an ark. With drought, he would have been stuck, high and dry. Drought has beset more than one-third of the U.S. in 2007. Much of the West continued its decade-long aridity, while parts of the Southeast — from Mississippi to Virginia — experienced extreme drought. National drought maps showing impacts, stream flow, soil moisture, vegetation health and daily fire danger are at <http://www.drought.unl.edu/dm/current.html>. State information is at <http://water.usgs.gov/waterwatch/?m=dryw&w=map&r=us>.

Global warming will increase precipitation in some places and drought in others. Warmer air causes faster evaporation over land, which, with other factors, leads to drought. And once in drought, it's hard to break the warm-dry cycle. Average annual temperatures are increasing across the continental U.S., shifting warmer climates north. Average U.S. annual temperatures are expected to rise from 5 to 9 degrees F during this century. Drought is now embedded at the two ends of the Sunbelt—the Southwest and the Southeast. Columbia and Princeton University researchers recently projected a century-long drought in the Southwest.

Decreased precipitation is also predicted for the lee of the Rocky Mountains, Oklahoma panhandle, North Texas, eastern Colorado and western Kansas. But even where precipitation is projected to increase, warmer temperatures will increase the rate of evaporation. One study suggested that higher evaporation rates will outpace precipitation gains in many areas, resulting in dry conditions.

Drought predictions for a particular state or even region get more and more iffy the further into the future they are made. But short-term predictions—the next six months—are reasonably good; go to the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center at <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/>. With drought come water conflicts, reduced agricultural production, degraded water recreation, water-quality problems, higher prices and greater fire hazards. Fires covering several hundred thousands of acres are now common in the West. The annual economic cost of drought—estimated at \$6-8 billion in 2000-- typically exceeds those of hurricanes and floods.

Warming temperatures—and even more certainly drought--will change what farmers plant where, the types of forests that grow in different places and second-home patterns. If drought were to persist in the Southeast, for example, water constraints would limit growth and development across the board—in cities, suburbs and second-home communities. If the Sunbelt gets

hotter and drier, markets for retiree housing and second homes will weaken and property values fall. The loss of recreational water in these states would be a harder blow over time than the occasional hurricane.

Several million Americans buy country property for second homes, investment and recreation each year. What should warming and drought mean to buyers of country property, particularly second homes? Think about it. Factor warming and drought into where you look to buy. Water supply should now be a big part of a buyer's location choices. Drought projections will not be pinpoint accurate, but they may help you find states that seem to be less prone to drought.

Avoid places with chronic drought and water shortages. Where agriculture already depends on irrigation, look elsewhere. No place is immune, but some places are likely to be more water-dependable than others. Look from Minnesota east to Maine, south to the upper Ohio River Basin. Look higher in watersheds. Look where it's now cold and wet. Look at country in and around...dare I say it...the Rust Belt.

Design defensively. Landscape against fire and for water conservation. Use rain barrels. Excavate a deep pond near your house. Make sure fire trucks can get to your place and turn around. Consider a waterless toilet for emergency use. Store water for those non-rainy days. Catch water in a roof-fed cistern. Build emergency water supply in plastic tanks that can gravity-feed your house. Add one or two storage tanks into your normal water-supply system.

Conserve. While I hate low-flush toilets as much as the next guy, economical water use makes sense. It's painless and saves money too. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published *Are You Ready? A Guide to Citizen Preparedness in 2002* (<http://www.fema.gov/areyouready/>). The section on "Emergency Water Shortage" includes sound advice on indoor and outdoor conservation tactics. The book also covers other natural and man-made hazards.

Thinking about drought doesn't guarantee immunity, but it may improve your odds of staying wet.

Curtis Seltzer, land consultant, is the author of *How To Be A DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property* at www.curtis-seltzer.com. He holds a Class A residential contractor's license in Virginia and has lived in a now 90-year-old farmhouse for 25 years.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307

540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com