

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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DROUGHT

The term "drought," like many others in the meteorological vocabulary, calls for a multiplicity of definitions. Several are found in reference books, but each, as a rule, is limited in its applications, geographically or otherwise. The condition described under this name has been thought of most commonly in relation to its effects on agriculture and grazing, but drought plays a variety of roles in the affairs of mankind. It has its engineering effects, as when it leads to the shut-down of hydroelectric plants and hampers the operation of municipal water supplies. It may affect industries of various kinds through preventing or restricting the work of factories. It may cause the suspension of navigation on inland streams. It may seriously impair public health in ways other than through its effects on food supply.

From an agricultural point of view a drought implies something more than a mere deficiency of rain. It is a combination of conditions that have a parching effect on vegetation, and its factors may include, besides the absence or scantiness of rain, low humidity, windy weather, high temperature and deficient soil water.

Attempts have been made to introduce numerical scales of drought intensity, but none has come into general use. Duration is most important in this connection; so much so that, according to some authorities, the intensity of a drought increases as the square of its duration. There is, however, no positive meteorological criterion by which the relative intensities of several droughts can be determined.

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