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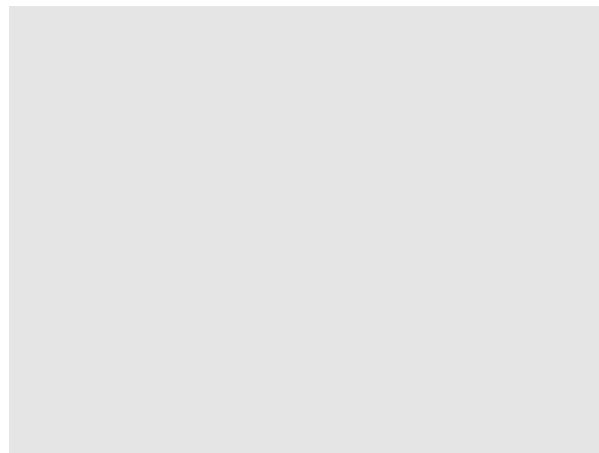
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WKU will host nation's drought experts next month

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 3 hrs ago



Stuart Foster

Submitted

Between tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and wildfires, droughts probably wouldn't top anyone's list of the most devastating natural disasters.

But State Climatologist Stuart Foster, director of the Kentucky Climate Center, said that kind of thinking can make for a costly mistake.

Agriculture is always the first sector hit, with the loss of soil moisture hampering productivity, and if droughts last long enough to drain streams and reservoirs, they can threaten water supplies.

But those are only a few of its effects, he said.

“The impacts can actually be pretty far-reaching and run into some high dollar amounts,” Foster said.

Between Sept. 17 and 19, the Knicely Conference Center at Western Kentucky University will host scientists and policymakers from across the nation for the biennial U.S. Drought Monitor forum.

It’s the first time WKU has hosted the conference.

Foster said it’s an opportunity to share local drought concerns with scientists and drought experts associated with federal agencies responsible for publishing the weekly U.S. Drought Monitor. Attendees could range from government agency representatives to local utilities and extension office employees. WKU is co-hosting the conference with the Kentucky Division of Water.

Released every Thursday, the U.S. Drought Monitor is a map that shows parts of the nation that are in drought and what level of drought they’re in.

To be clear, it’s not a forecast. It actually looks backward by tracking how much precipitation did or didn’t fall up to the Tuesday morning before the map is released. It’s used by several federal agencies for planning purposes, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which uses it to trigger disaster declarations and eligibility for low-interest loans, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Unlike in the western part of the U.S., where droughts develop slowly and last years, Foster said droughts in our region tend to be shorter but can develop and intensify rapidly. Many droughts last only a few months here, but their relatively mild nature doesn't add to the public's understanding of them.



“Droughts are probably one of the most poorly understood natural hazards that's related to weather and climate,” Foster said.

Unlike the effects of a tornado or a flood, which are measurable right away, a drought isn't always instantly perceivable. But that doesn't stop it from having devastating effects. Depleted soil moisture can damage infrastructure, including cracking the foundation of a building, and lower water levels can affect shipping along rivers, Foster said.

“It's sometimes referred to as the creeping hazard,” Foster said.

Kentucky has dealt with a significant drought since 2012, but drought experts predict the state is more likely to become prone to shorter but intense droughts, accompanied by more severe droughts. Foster called these “flash droughts.”

The conference will allow more than local stakeholders to make their concerns known, however. Foster said the event will also offer students opportunities to network and learn about careers in drought management.



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“It will be a chance for students that otherwise would not be able to attend,” these events, Foster said, adding it will provide opportunities that students “could not get out of a textbook.”

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