

[http://www.virginislandsdailynews.com/news/territory-faces-severe-drought-as-temperatures-spike-and-rainfall-putters/article\\_b3d286bd-d405-509a-89d2-543e0a25a718.html](http://www.virginislandsdailynews.com/news/territory-faces-severe-drought-as-temperatures-spike-and-rainfall-putters/article_b3d286bd-d405-509a-89d2-543e0a25a718.html)

# Territory faces severe drought, as temperatures spike and rainfall putters

By A.J. RAO Daily News Staff  
Jun 17, 2020



The ongoing drought has led to an uptick in business for operations such as Crown Mountain Water in Lindbergh Bay, St. Thomas. Farmers, and residents in general, have been affected by dry conditions territorywide.

Daily News photo by ALLEGRA CHRISTOPHER

Sporadic rainfall and record-breaking temperatures have plunged the territory into a severe drought, leaving lands parched, cisterns dry and farmers in dire need of relief.

“It’s extremely bleak,” said Dale Browne, owner of Sejah Farm on St. Croix. “We’re not getting any rain right now and that means livestock farmers are going to suffer significantly.”

Indeed, St. Croix has so far borne the brunt of the territory's dry weather, with only 0.56 inches of rain reported at Rohlsen Airport in May — nearly four inches below normal.

Total year-to-date rainfall for St. Croix is 8.68 inches, about 3.2 inches below normal.

The figures come from the U.S. Drought Monitor, which indicated in its latest report that all three islands share a “D2” designation, or severe drought, due to their significant precipitation deficits.

For farmers like Browne, whose 15-acre farm includes animals, the drought means less water and less grass, a deadly combination for livestock.

Worse still, with the St. Croix abattoir closed as it undergoes reforms to meet federal standards, Browne said he cannot cull or reduce his herd to a more manageable level.

“We are stuck with a number of animals that we're going to have to feed, and that's an additional cost just to maintain the health of the animals,” Browne said.

Topping it off, the V.I. Agriculture Department, due to the drought, has put limits on the amount of water it can distribute to customers.

For Browne, the limit “doesn't cut it.”

“If a farmer only has access to 500 gallons of water from the Department of Agriculture per day, he'll have to scale back his production to maybe half,” he said. “So, if he's talking about 2,000 plants, he will have to [tend to] about 1,000. And if that is his only means of income, that's going to take a toll on him.”

Farmers, of course, are not the only ones racing for water.

According to Sydney Stern, owner of Crown Mountain Water on St. Thomas, drought conditions have noticeably increased demand for cistern and bottled water across the island.

“We open up at 8 a.m. and we're sold out by 10 a.m. — that's not usually the case under normal circumstances,” Stern said.

The St. Thomas-St. John district reported roughly 2.9 inches of rain in May, about an inch below normal, according to the National Weather Service.

Stern said her bulk haulers carry 5,200 gallons of water each. In the course of 2-3 hours, a staggering 92,000 gallons of water are distributed.

“Things really just dried up,” said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Rippey, who maintains weather data from the Virgin Islands, indicated that part of the territory’s current drought is not just the lack of rainfall but its high temperatures.

“We are currently on track on St. Croix to see the hottest June since 1980, which was the year the all-time record was set for monthly average temperature,” Rippey said.

With that record being 85.6 degrees and St. Croix’s month-to-date average temperature being 84.9 degrees, Rippey said if the month were to end today, it would be the third hottest on record (since the 1950s) and the hottest since 1980.

“Even by tropical standards, it has been a very hot month,” he said.

Ralf Boulon, a St. John resident who has maintained an unbroken record of daily rainfall observations from his home since late 1983, agreed.

“The past three months have been exceptionally dry,” he said. “This year started with above average rainfall for January and February but then quickly devolved into below average rainfall up to the present. While it is as dry as 2015, our last real drought, the effects on vegetation have been somewhat lessened by that early year rain. But the overall conditions at present are as bad as 2015 and some past dry years.”

V.I. Agriculture Commissioner Positive Nelson told The Daily News that his department is positioning to stock up on feed and hay during this period. He also encouraged farmers to practice conservation as much as possible due to the limits on water.

For those interested in becoming a volunteer weather reporter or have precipitation information that they wish to donate to the University of the Virgin Islands Cooperative Extension Service to be digitized, call UVI Cooperative Extension Service Agent Christina Chanes at 340-693-1072.

---

— Contact A.J. Rao at 340-714-9104 or email [ajrao@dailynews.vi](mailto:ajrao@dailynews.vi).

AJRao