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America's Farmers, Reeling From Floods, Face a New Problem: No Water

The breach of an irrigation canal left more than 100,000 acres of farmland in Nebraska and Wyoming without water at a critical point in the growing cycle.

An irrigation canal that usually brings water to Gering, Neb., lies empty after a tunnel collapsed in Wyoming.

By Mitch Smith

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MITCHELL, Neb. — For farmers battered by floods and blizzards and one of the rainiest springs on record, this has been a year tainted by too much water.

But suddenly, across more than 100,000 acres of Nebraska and Wyoming, there is no water to be found. The dirt is cracking. The beans are turning a sickly yellow. And the corn, which looked so promising just two weeks ago, is straining for fluid through long, scorching days.

The countryside is suddenly parched because a century-old tunnel that carries irrigation water across more than 100 miles, from Wyoming to Nebraska, collapsed this month. The cause of the collapse was not yet clear but the effect has been immediate:

A large expanse of farmland is parched. And hundreds of farmers, already reeling from years of low grain prices, are without water at the most critical point of the growing cycle.

After the collapse of an irrigation tunnel, Kendall Busch was cut off from his usual water source and forced to use a much more limited supply. Theo Stroomer for The New York Times

"Could you survive working with no salary for a year?" said Kendall Busch, who grows sugar beets, beans and corn near Mitchell, Neb. "That's what we're doing."

Across much of the Great Plains, this growing season seemed cursed even before the irrigation crisis.

First came trade wars that threw the grain markets into chaos.

Then floods covered cornfields with ice chunks the size of golf carts.

An abnormally wet spring delayed planting by weeks or months.

Finally, just when conditions were looking more stable, the irrigation canal split open and water stopped flowing.

A century-old irrigation tunnel that collapsed near Fort Laramie, Wyo., has left fields of hundreds of farmers parched.
Theo Stroomer for The New York Times

Not every problem hit every farmer, but few in Midwestern agriculture will make it to harvest unscathed.

"It's just been event after event after event," said Dave Kaufman, who canceled the purchase of a new Ford F-150 truck to save money after much of his farmland outside Gering, Neb., went dry. "And you would think that the last shoe had dropped, but it hasn't."

In the semiarid hills of the Nebraska Panhandle and eastern Wyoming, where summer rains are rare, farmers depend on irrigation water diverted from rivers through a network of canals and tunnels. A portion of that canal system had for generations nourished corn, sugar beets, pinto beans and other crops with water siphoned from the North Platte River.

That all changed July 17.

Buz Oliver, who grows corn and hay outside Fort Laramie, Wyo., was out checking his crops early that morning when he noticed that a nearby cornfield had turned into a lake. "I can see all that water out across my neighbor's field, and I'm like, 'What the heck's going on?'" Mr. Oliver said.

Buz Oliver, who grows corn and hay outside Fort Laramie, Wyo., was out checking his crops when he noticed a nearby cornfield had turned into a lake. Theo Stroomer for The New York Times

A climb to the top of a hill revealed a worst-case scenario: Not far from his property, a roughly half-mile tunnel that carried water through a large hill had collapsed in the night, leaving a swift-moving current no room to advance. Within hours, as pressure built, the earthen banks of the canal had been overwhelmed. Water busted through with such force that old-growth trees were snapped into pieces, fence posts were ripped from the ground and cows, with no time to retreat, became stranded on small islands in their former pasture.

Farmers specialize in contingency planning, but this was a disaster no one saw coming.

The tunnels and canals, though old, were maintained regularly and had performed for generations with few major problems. Elected irrigation officials in both states oversee management of the canal system, which was built by the federal government. Though the cause of the breach was not yet identified, it was raising new questions about the reliance of American commerce on decaying infrastructure. In Nebraska alone, around $50 million in crops is at stake.

"The biggest advantage the United States farmers and ranchers have has been our transportation and infrastructure system," said Steve Wellman, the director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, who said broad investment was needed to improve the disaster-prone roads, canals and dams that help farmers grow their crops and get them to buyers.

The breach was another blow for Nebraska, where some $840 million in crops, livestock and land were damaged by floods and blizzards this spring, and where the governor has issued emergency declarations this year in 81 of 93 counties. Even as fields in western Nebraska were at risk of shriveling without hydration, some farmland in eastern Nebraska remained underwater, and other flood-damaged fields may not be usable for planting for years.

An irrigation pipeline in Gering, where farmers depend on irrigation water diverted through a network of canals and tunnels. Theo Stroomer for The New York Times

Out in the state's far west, the canal failure came at an especially cruel moment. After soggy fields delayed planting, farmers spent heavily this spring on seed and fertilizer and labor to get their crops in the ground. By mid-July, the fields looked promising. Crops were approaching the point when irrigation becomes most important.

"All the major crops, they are at peak water use, at a stage we shouldn't stress them at all," said Xin Qiao, a professor who studies irrigation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Because of the canal failure, he predicted that farmers could harvest up to 90 percent less corn, 70 percent less edible beans and about half as many sugar beets.

Times were already hard. Corn prices had been low in recent years, leaving many farmers with barely enough income to cover their costs, let alone make payments on a new tractor or a new field. Farms filing for bankruptcy protection rose by 19 percent last year across the Midwest, the highest level in a decade, according to data compiled by the American Farm Bureau.

But farmers in the Nebraska Panhandle and eastern Wyoming avoided the worst of the spring flooding, and with corn prices ticking upward, this felt like the year when they might finally start to get ahead. Now they face uncertainty about whether crop insurance will cover their losses, and the possibility of a monstrous tax bill to cover a permanent fix for the canal, which could cost up to $18 million.

"There will be several of these producers who won't be able to make it through this," said Steve Erdman, a Nebraska state senator and longtime farmer whose district includes some of the newly dry land. "They're going to lose their farms."

Most immediately, farmers face the challenge of salvaging whatever they can from this year's crop. A temporary repair may get water moving through the canal again by mid-August, which would help. But what they really need —

and what Mr. Erdman has asked his constituents to pray for — is rain, and lots of it.

On Saturday afternoon, at his farm outside Gering, Neb., Preston Stricker monitored a live view of the weather radar on the wall of his office. Nearby, a dry-erase calendar noted July 17 — "Collapse" — and July 19 — "Water Off" — when the last bit of irrigation reached his farm. All the while, dry heat and a blazing July sun pounded his corn and beans.

"The beans take one or two timely rains, and that crop could turn out pretty good," Mr. Stricker said. "With no rain, it could fail worse."

A few hours later, the sun retreated and a thunderstorm blew through, dropping about a half inch of rain on his fields. He was hoping, he said, for more.

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