

# BRIEFER

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## When National Disasters Go Global: Drought in the U.S., Food and Global Insecurity

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*This report also appeared on the humanitarian news site [AlertNet](#), and [Reuters](#).*

The national Drought Monitor [recently declared](#) a drought for almost [80% of the contiguous](#) United States, ranging in intensity from “abnormally dry” to “drought-exceptional.” Five days ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture followed by [declaring disasters in 26 U.S. states](#). This is the largest national disaster area ever declared. But while the drought is obviously a serious concern for the U.S. (historically, droughts are the nation’s [most costly natural disaster](#)), it also has worrying implications for other countries that are tied to the U.S. through the global food market. Coupled with other recent extreme weather events across the globe, the U.S. drought could have a globally destabilizing influence. And while it is too early to tell exactly why these events are happening, in the way that they are happening, [recent reports](#) show that climatic changes are a part of the story.

### **Record-breaking droughts, and an uncertain climate future**

The conditions of this drought are abnormal. The drought [happened suddenly](#) - what is called a “flash drought” – because it has occurred over a matter of months, rather than seasons or years. It is associated with record-breaking temperatures, and has been labeled [among the worst droughts](#) in U.S. history. Climate change projections are set to make

[matters worse](#). According to NOAA and the Met Office, last year’s drought in Texas was 20 times more likely because of climate change. Furthermore, as temperatures are set to continue increasing, these [conditions will become more frequent](#).

### **Impact on the global food market**

As a result of the drought, the U.S. Department of Agriculture adjusted its prediction for corn yields, the country’s largest export crop, down by 12%. This, and any subsequent adjustments, will likely [impact global corn prices](#), but also meat and dairy prices, as corn is used for animal feed. Meanwhile, [beef prices are still high](#) from last year’s drought in Texas. As a leading exporter of corn and soy, the U.S. is intricately linked to the global food market. Drought and crop failure in the U.S. could spike world food prices and [have serious implications](#) for places like Mexico, China, Central America and India, who rely heavily on imports of these crops, as well as animal feed. But this is not the first time that droughts have caused a spike in world food prices. If this drought does lead to a price spike, it will be the [fifth such spike in six years](#).

### **The security implications of food price spikes**

What we’ve also seen is that spikes in world food prices have increased the likelihood of [instability and riots](#). In some instances, [crop failure in one part of the world associated with instability half-](#)

[way around the globe](#), can contribute to serious diplomatic crises between the U.S. and its allies, as occurred with Egypt, and could conceivably result in U.S. military involvement. This is part of a larger phenomenon Dr. Troy Sternberg calls “[the globalization of hazards](#),” where natural hazards in one region can have a significant impact on regions halfway across the globe. This is not to say that the current U.S. drought will necessarily lead to unrest. However, it is not unprecedented for droughts, and other climatic events that damage crop production, to do so.

### **Collective impact of crop failure across the globe**

It is also important to consider that the drought and crop failures in the U.S. [are not happening in isolation](#). In recent years, extreme hot and dry weather has forced [Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan](#) to reduce their harvest forecasts (and [two studies](#) explicitly link the devastating Russian heat wave of 2010 to climate change). [European Union wheat yields](#) this year will be smaller, in part, because Spain is suffering from the [second worst drought](#) in fifty years. [North and South Korea](#) are facing the worst drought in a century. Shifts in glacial [melt and rainfall](#) are threatening crops in Pakistan. [The proliferation of locusts](#) throughout West Africa is threatening household food security. Recent [floods in Japan, India](#) and [Bangladesh](#) are threatening rice crops. Argentina’s soy crops were [severely depleted](#) because of a shortage of rain. And in Mali, [drought combined with other factors](#) led to a major humanitarian disaster in the region. The list goes on.

Many of these conditions are record-setting, or the worst of their kind in decades and sometimes centuries. And climate projections threaten to [make matters worse](#). What this means is that it is possible that the global food market is about to witness an unusual amount of stress. It is not entirely clear if the market is prepared for it, or even if nations have the capacity to adequately respond.

### **Impact on U.S. assistance and diplomacy**

Food, for better or worse, is also used as a [form of diplomacy](#). For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s [Food for Peace program](#) has sent 106 million metric tons to the hungry of the world, feeding billions of people and saving countless lives. The program depends on the unparalleled productivity of American farmers and the American agricultural system. Without this vast system there would be no Food for Peace program, or any of the [other food assistance programs](#) either run by the U.S. government, or heavily supported by the U.S. such as the UN’s [World Food Program](#).

On average, American food aid provides 60 percent of the world’s food aid, feeding millions of desperately hungry people every year. This means that in addition to facing an increasing risk from lower crop and animal stock yields and global food market shocks, the U.S. may also be limiting its ability to respond rapidly to global disasters, including global food crises. This is bad news for the global poor, and for U.S. diplomacy.

### **Climate insecurity is a global security threat**

In short, climate insecurity is a global security threat. Unprecedented droughts in the U.S., which according to [many climate projections](#) are expected to occur more and more often in the future, threaten both national health and global food security, which could lead to significant instability in key strategic regions of the world. The pattern of extreme weather events across the globe compound the problem. The worrying thing is that these conditions could be the new normal.

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