



The historic drought that laid waste to America's grain and corn belt is unlikely to ease before the middle of this year, a government forecast warned on Thursday.

The annual spring outlook from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted hotter, drier conditions across much of the US, including parts of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, where farmers have been fighting to hang on to crops of winter wheat.

The three-month forecast noted an additional hazard, however, for the midwest: with heavy, late snows setting up conditions for flooding along the Red and Souris rivers in North Dakota.

"It's a mixed bag of flooding, drought and warm weather," Laura Furgione, the deputy director of NOAA's weather service told a conference call with reporters.

Last year produced the hottest year since record keeping began more than a century ago, with several weeks in a row of 100+degree days. It also brought drought to close to 65% of the country by summer's end.

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