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[Pistons Talk](#)
[Tiger Talk](#)
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[Tech Talk](#)
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[Hot Sites](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Recommendations](#)
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Michele Haskell / Associated Press

This Feb. 26 photo shows the Neversink Reservoir in Sullivan County, N.Y., which supplies drinking water to New York City, at less than 50 percent capacity.

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[Livingston](#)
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[Oakland](#)
[Wayne](#)
[On Detroit](#)
[Nation / World](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Death Notices](#)
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[Religion](#)
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[Special Reports](#)
[Technology](#)

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[Lions/NFL](#)
[Pistons/NBA](#)
[Red Wings/NHL](#)
[Shock/WNBA](#)
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[Motor Sports](#)
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U.S. braces for water shortage

New York and Baltimore tap temporary supplies; wells in some states have run dry

By Jeff Donn / Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. -- Drought has engulfed nearly a third of the United States, threatening to confront some places this summer with what experts say could be their worst water shortages in years.

"This is a sleeping giant," says climatologist Mark Svoboda, at the National Drought Mitigation Center in Lincoln, Neb. "The impact is still to come."

Already, New York and Baltimore are pumping water from temporary supplies normally avoided for their potentially less desirable color or taste. Thousands of shallow wells in New Hampshire and Georgia have run dry. In Kansas, some ranchers are hauling in water or selling off cattle.

Yet a much stiffer test will come this summer when farmers water crops, homeowners douse lawns and gardens, and high temperatures evaporate more water faster. Without a rainy spring, some places in the East may face a summer of water problems that rival record droughts of the 1960s, according to Harry Lins, a drought specialist at the U.S. Geological Survey.

In typically dry Southern California, the recent feeble wet season is apt to harden into full-blown drought, say government and private forecasters. Bernie Rayno, a forecaster at the private AccuWeather service in State College, Pa., is more worried about that region than the East.

"They're missing their window of opportunity," he says. "Once you get past that, you're

Roberto Borea / Associated Press

This Jan. 29 photo shows the depleted Prettyboy reservoir near Middletown, Md., in Baltimore County.

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PHOTOS

Sports
Red Wings
Lions
Autos
Joyrides
News
History

not going to get rain there."

In the last six months, Los Angeles has seen just over a third of its usual 11 inches.

Overall, drought has spread to about 30 percent of the country, according to forecaster Richard Tinker at the Climate Prediction Center of the National Weather Service. That is an unusually broad reach but still far short of the 1930s Dust Bowl. In those years, up to 70 percent of the country was parched, and dust clouds sometimes blotted out the sun for days at a time.

Drought conditions now run in two vast Eastern and Western strips, each hundreds of miles across, from Maine to Georgia and Montana to Texas, according to a federal-academic partnership that puts together the U.S. Drought Monitor map.

Forecasters say it's especially difficult to make long-range forecasts for the Northeast. But they are hopeful that the rains typical of spring will relieve some of that region's drought conditions, which took hold only last fall. Drought has lingered elsewhere, like Texas and Georgia, for up to six years.

There is no single accepted definition of drought. But one popular standard defines it as 70 percent of normal rain or snow for three months straight.

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