



▶ [Latest Metro/State reports](#)

▶ [Previous Story](#) ▶ [Next Story](#)



Thursday, June 26, 2003

- detnews**
- SITE INDEX**
- [Homepage](#)
- [Search](#)
- [CyberSurveys](#)
- [Horoscope](#)
- [Lottery](#)
- [Michigan's Best](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Staff](#)

- FORUMS**
- [News Talk](#)
- [Autos Talk](#)
- [Big 10 Talk](#)
- [High Schools](#)
- [Lions Talk](#)
- [Pistons Talk](#)
- [Wings Talk](#)
- [Tech Talk](#)
- [Tiger Talk](#)
- [Weight-loss](#)
- [Ford Memories](#)

- NEWS**
- [Autos](#)
- ▶ [Insider](#)
- ▶ [Consumer](#)
- ▶ [Joyrides](#)
- [Business](#)
- ▶ [Careers](#)
- ▶ [Money & Life](#)
- [Census](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Commuting](#)
- [Detroit History](#)
- [Editorials](#)
- [Metro / State](#)
- ▶ [Livingston](#)
- ▶ [Macomb](#)
- ▶ [Oakland](#)
- ▶ [Wayne](#)
- ▶ [On Detroit](#)



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

**Shirley Hunter of New Haven probably won't have to worry about watering limits.**

Spring rains lift drought in Michigan

Lawn-watering limits unlikely this summer; farmers still cautious

By Vanessa Clarke / *The Detroit News*

Brother Rick Samyn of the Capuchin Mission in Detroit loves horticulture. But a persistent shortage of rain in the past three years almost kept the monk from his gardening projects.

Not today.

Beneficial rains this year have taken southeastern Michigan off the National Weather Service drought map. Detroit rainfall in May was 4.73 inches, the highest total for the month in three years.

Additional rains were forecast for today. For several seasons, Michigan had been on the eastern edge of the vast and devastating drought area



Metro/State

- [Metro/State index for Thursday, June 26, 2003](#)
- [Spring rains lift drought in Michigan](#)
- [Two found dead by firefighters who battled house fire](#)
- [Fireworks rekindle Detroit love affair](#)
- [Kid drug tests offered](#)
- [Three indicted Detroit officers released on bond](#)
- [Police ready for busy holiday on land, sea](#)
- [Graffiti artists arrested again](#)
- [Woman dies after fall from 17th floor](#)
- [New law dean says justice missed the point in U-M dissent](#)
- [King's vision was an American anthem](#)
- [House plan lets agencies use state police towers](#)
- [New Zealand native transforms gardening](#)
- [Raising stink gets farmer into mess of legal trouble](#)
- [Building fixes draw business](#)
- [Michigan Briefs](#)

Sections for this date

Thursday, June 26, 2003

- [Nation / World](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- ▶ [Death Notices](#)
- [Politics / Govt.](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Schools](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Technology](#)

## SPORTS

- [Sports Insider](#)
- ▶ [Lions/NFL](#)
- ▶ [Red](#)
- [Wings/NHL](#)
- ▶ [Pistons/NBA](#)
- ▶ [Shock/WNBA](#)
- ▶ [Tigers/Baseball](#)
- ▶ [MSU](#)
- ▶ [U-M](#)
- [More Colleges](#)
- [Golf Guide](#)
- [High Schools](#)
- [Motor Sports](#)
- [Outdoors](#)
- [More Sports](#)
- [Scoreboards](#)

## ENTERTAINMENT

- [Entertainment](#)
- ▶ [Casino Guide](#)
- ▶ [Movie Finder](#)
- ▶ [Restaurants](#)
- ▶ [TV Listings](#)
- [Crossword](#)

## GREAT LAKES ESCAPES

- [Home](#)
- ▶ [Destinations](#)
- ▶ [Hunt & Fish](#)
- ▶ [On the Water](#)
- ▶ [Recreation](#)

## HOMESTYLE

- [Homestyle home](#)
- ▶ [Decorating](#)
- ▶ [Eats & Drinks](#)
- ▶ [Recipe Box](#)
- ▶ [Gardening](#)
- ▶ [Health](#)
- ▶ [Home](#)
- [Improvement](#)

that enveloped America's midsection and western regions.

There is hope that the mild temperatures and rainfall this spring have finally broken the hot, dry weather that disordered Michigan's climate over the past four years.

That weather pattern, linked to the La Niña-El Niño cycle of southern Pacific ocean currents, is blamed in part for the recent spate of falling Great Lakes levels, summer sprinkling bans and agricultural distress.

Nothing is certain, but the National Weather Service now believes the state will have normal rainfall through the summer. That means relief for farmers who have suffered heavy crop losses and homeowners who have seen lawns and gardens wither during official sprinkling bans. And it could help ease the threat of West Nile Virus, health officials say.

"We've had above average rain this year," National Weather Service meteorologist Greg Mann said. "With the near average temperatures and regular rains, we won't be expecting the drought to continue."

Samyn, whose Earthworks Garden Project is part of the Capuchins' charitable mission, said the influx of showers and thunderstorms is a "Godsend."

"I've already got most of my mulch down," Samyn said. "I'm just waiting for the next set of showers."

### Encouraging outlook

The Michigan Farm Bureau, the state's main agriculture service organization, agreed that the outlook is encouraging. "We've had very timely rains," said Bob Boehm, manager of the bureau's Commodities and Marketing department, "but we're not out of the woods yet."

Normal rainfall would be welcome to farmers, who have suffered a combination of drought and untimely episodes of frost and heat. Fruit growers alone lost some \$80 million in revenue last year. Only 5 percent of the tart-cherry crop was harvested due to frost, and 85 percent of Michigan's important crop of navy and other dry beans was lost because of severe weather in 2001.

Michigan farmers were among those eligible for billions of dollars in aid made available by Congress to cover drought losses.

"Producers feel better this year," Boehm said. "It's been a much improved picture up to this point."

Among those hoping for normal rainfall is Mark Falker, a Bruce Township dairy farmer and president of the Macomb Farm Bureau. He said many Michigan vegetable and fruit growers lost all or most of their crops because of the drought.

"The vegetable guys who couldn't irrigate were hurt the hardest," Falker said. "But most of the guys are set up to irrigate because if they go a couple weeks without rain the crop is dead."

**Brother Rick Samyn oversees the Earthworks Garden Project at the Capuchin Mission in Detroit. He said the May-June rains gave the garden a needed boost.**

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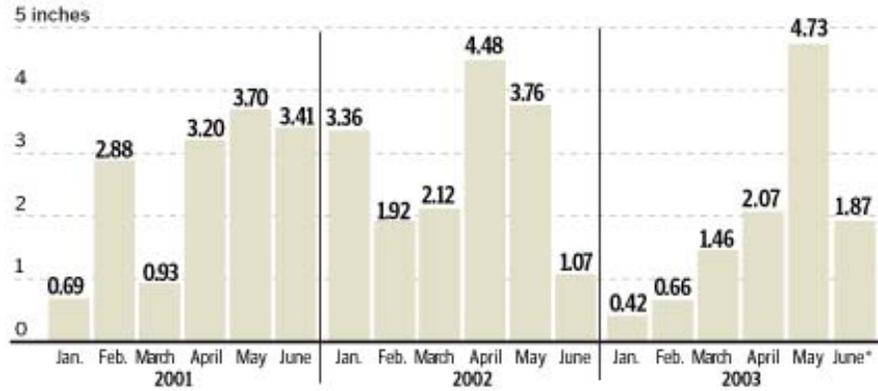
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- [Sports](#)
- [Red Wings](#)
- [Lions](#)
- [Autos](#)
- [Joyrides](#)
- [News](#)
- [History](#)

## May brings needed rain

Metro Detroit rainfall in May was the best for the month in three years, easing southeast Michigan's drought.

**Monthly precipitation:**



\*Numbers are through June 23, 2003  
Source: National Weather Service

*The Detroit News*

## Drought conditions ease

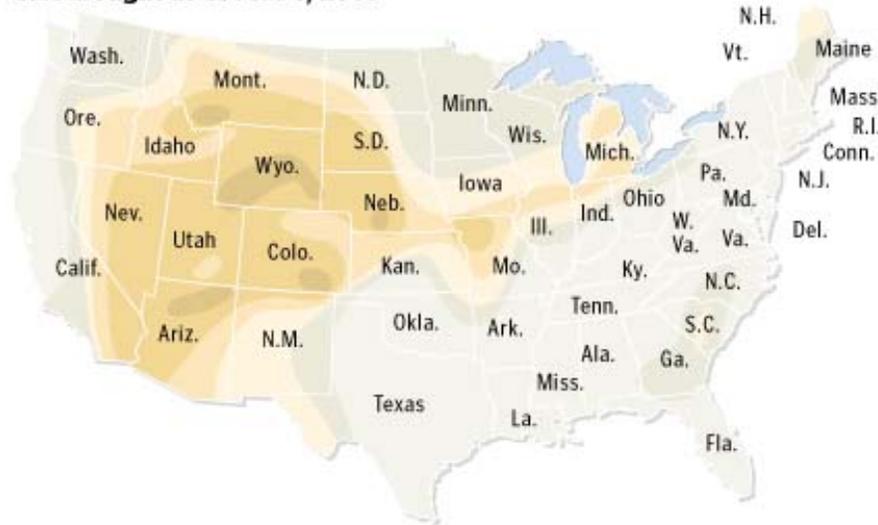
Michigan has been on the eastern edge of the National Weather Service drought area for more than a year, but beneficial rains in May erased the drought in all but the state's southwest corner.

**KEY**

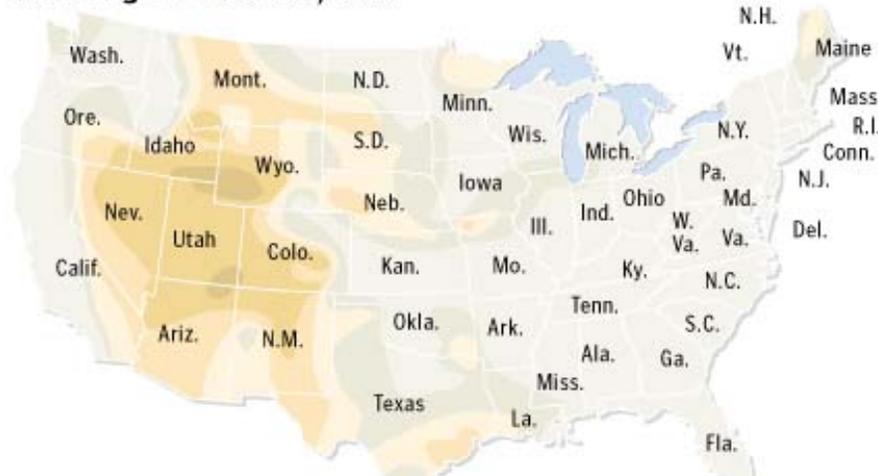
Abnormally dry | Drought

- Abnormally dry
- Moderate
- Severe
- Extreme
- Exceptional

**U.S. drought as of Feb. 4, 2003**



**U.S. drought as of June 17, 2003**



## Garden relief

If the beneficial weather pattern holds, home gardeners also will feel relief -- sprinkling bans will become less likely. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department currently has no restrictions on use of water for lawns and gardens.

"And the department agreed not to ask for restrictions this year," spokesman George Ellenwood said. "We are very prepared to meet customer demands."

Sprinkling bans caused considerable frustration over the past two years for Metro Detroit homeowners, particularly for those who had invested heavily in landscaping new homes.

Part of the reason for the improved outlook is the apparent shift away from the El Nino pattern, or the upwelling of warm water in the Pacific Ocean off the western coast of South America.

For the past two months, there has been a change to the La Nina part of the cycle, where cold water currents form along the surface of the tropical Pacific, the National Weather Service said. The La Nina-El Nino pattern has a dramatic impact on global climate, and Michigan's recent dry, hot weather was attributed in part to the presence of the El Nino cycle.

Forecasts are uncertain, but the weather service says that, based on historical records, the appearance of La Nina could signal a return to more normal weather patterns in Michigan.

## Low lake levels

While the immediate outlook for farmers and back yard gardeners has improved, the same can't be said for Michigan boaters.

According to the Detroit District of the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers, the Great Lakes remain well below normal and even below last year's depressed levels despite recent rains. Lakes Michigan and Huron are 11 inches below last year, Lake St. Clair is down 8 inches and Lake Erie is off 5 inches.

Over the coming month, the Corps of Engineers expects Michigan and Huron to rise by just 1 inch, while St. Clair will fall by 1 inch and Erie by 2 inches. Only a sustained period of normal rainfall could begin to bring the lakes back toward average levels, experts say.

There's another drawback -- the end of the drought and the return of the rain mean the return of Michigan's mosquitoes, which had all but vanished from backyard barbecues during the dry spell.

But oddly enough, the wet summer is good news for the health workers battling the mosquito-borne West Nile virus, which last year killed 64 people in Michigan and sickened hundreds of others.

The mosquitoes that spread the disease -- urban-dwelling members of the culex species -- thrive in drought conditions. They congregate in cities, breeding in old tires, discarded containers, storm sewers and catch basins. But rain washes the eggs and larvae away, reducing the population.

In Oakland County, which had the highest West Nile death toll -- 20 -- in the state, county health director George Miller was cheered by the wet weather reports, but not enough to ease off the county's aggressive mosquito control campaign.

"We don't want people to think it's safe to go out now without taking precautions," Miller said.

*Detroit News* staff writer Jennifer Brooks contributed to this report. You can reach Vanessa Clarke at (313) 222-2035 or [vclarke@detnews.com](mailto:vclarke@detnews.com).



David Coates / The Detroit News

**Kathy Walsh waters the flowers at her Grosse Pointe Woods home.**

▶ [Previous Story](#)

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