



COLBY FREE PRESS

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Drought takes toll on crops across region

By Tisha Cox

Colby Free Press

Dryland corn in Thomas County is nearly destroyed because of drought said extension agent Doug Musick.



D. Musick

"The dryland corn is a near total loss," he said.

Extreme heat and little rain in late July decimated the crop,

leaving farmers wondering what to do with the damaged corn.

Farmer Kriss Schroeder, who has dryland corn in north and south Thomas County and Logan County, said the corn this year won't be very good at all.

"The stuff up here is pretty poor," he said.

Schroeder's corn in Logan County is in slightly better shape because it received more rain. He is going to harvest some of the corn for its grain, but said it won't be very good quality, and will likely leave some standing.

Musick said some farmers will be able to collect insurance on their dryland corn, while others will cut it for silage or graze it.

"Most of the dryland crop had good plant growth," he said, "but the grain content won't be very good."

"But it will make a good cheap source of feed if a producer has cattle."

Irrigated corn is also stressed from the heat but has tolerated it better than the dryland crop. Musick said the heat in late July damaged some corn silks, causing poor pollination.

Each kernel on a corn cob must be pollinated separately and damaged silk will cause kernel loss. Without the silk the kernels can't be pollinated, and the ear won't develop, making for little corn.

Sometimes a cob will have kernels on one end and not the other and a producer can track when damage happened, but not specific causes.

"In the past some corn hybrids would shed pollen before the silks were mature, but that has been eliminated through breeding. Now, varieties shed pollen longer, but if the silks dry up, the corn won't get pollinated," Musick said.

Musick explained extreme environmental changes can affect corn.

"In general corn is a temperature-sensitive plant," he said. "If the

weather gets too hot, a plant will shut down and if it is dormant too long, it becomes susceptible to damage from insects and disease."

Musick said drought is the biggest potential threat to the crop, besides hail.

Overall, he said the irrigated corn crop will probably be below average in its yield come harvest.

Musick said farmers have also been using a lot of water to keep their crop alive, but use has declined since the beginning of August because of rain.

He added water use has almost tripled over the past three years. Along with it, the price of irrigating has increased, but some farmers have found a way to help. Some have switched from diesel to electric to pump their wells, which has helped decrease costs.

On marginal wells, he said farmers ran their wells non-stop in July to keep up.

Grain sorghum has also been affected by the heat.

"That crop hasn't experienced as much damage as the corn," Musick said, "but will probably have smaller heads as a result. It can hang on about two weeks longer than the corn," he said.

Unlike corn, the sorghum isn't planted as densely. By planting at a lower population, Musick said fewer plants mean more resources to go around.

In good conditions, the plants will develop and add more stalks and heads to a field, but in the dry conditions, the sorghum hasn't matured that much.

He also said soybeans in the county are doing well. There are no dryland soybeans in Thomas County, and all of the crop planted now are irrigated.

"Since early August we've had ideal weather for soybeans," Musick said.

If there is no damage or setbacks, harvest of the crop should begin in about mid-September.

Domestic plants doing fine
In town, Musick said the most damage has been done to trees, which have been affected by wind and drought.

He said the damage hasn't been very severe, and depends on species.

For grass and other plants, he recommends people water once or twice a week, between the hours of 6-10 a.m. By watering earlier in the day, it cuts down on evaporation loss.

Watering later in the day can have a cooling effect for some species.

The final performance



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

It was the end of an era for the downtown Colby Theater as Johnnie Barton, above, threads up for the last showing Thursday night. Since March 18, 1941, the downtown theater has provided entertainment to generations of families in the area, but now due to major repairs, the owners have decided to shut it down.

Both the downtown theater and Colby Cinema are owned and operated by Justin and Mary Comer of Colby with Jay Hawk still retaining ownership of the buildings. For the Comers, it was sad to see the theater close for good. More highlights on the theater's long history will appear next week.

President signs massive pension overhaul

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush on Thursday signed new rules to prod companies into shoring up their pension plans and offered strong words for corporate America: "Set aside enough money now."

Before an enthusiastic audience in an office building on the White House grounds, Bush called the legislation "the most sweeping reform of America's pension laws in over 30 years."

"Americans who spend a lifetime working hard should be confident that their pensions will be there when they retire," Bush said. "Some businesses are not putting away the cash they need to fund the pensions they promised to their workers."

The massive legislation reflects the evolution of workers' retirement benefits — the decline in traditional pensions that give retired employees a fixed payment each month and the rise of defined-contribution savings plans that rely on workers to build retirement assets.

It could also save taxpayers from

"Americans who spend a lifetime working hard should be confident that their pensions will be there when they retire."

— President George W. Bush

funding a multibillion-dollar bailout of the federal agency that insures pension plans.

Some critics, such as the Pension Rights Center, say the changes do nothing to stop companies from freezing their pensions and, with time, will weaken the pension system.

Bush seemed to recognize that, and urged companies to do their part on their own.

"This bill establishes sound standards for pension funding," he said. "Yet in the end, the primary responsibility rests with employers to fund the pension promises as soon as they can. The message from this administration, from those of us up there today, is this: you should keep

the promises you make to your workers. If you offer a private pension plan to your employees, you have a duty to set aside enough money now so your workers will get what they've been promised when they retire."

With its hundreds of pages, the bill seeks to strengthen traditional defined-benefit plans and requires companies to tell workers more about the health of their pension programs. It also nudges workers into putting more money away for their own retirement.

It aims to boost the 30,000 defined-benefit plans run by employers that are now underfunded by an estimated \$450 billion.

Those plans must reach 100 per-

cent funding, up from the current 90 percent requirement, in seven years.

Seriously underfunded "at risk" companies must contribute at a faster rate and face certain restrictions, such as a ban on increasing benefits.

Lawmakers allowed workers to contribute more to their personal retirement savings accounts, such as IRAs and 401(k)s, in future years.

Employers can encourage their workers to save by automatically enrolling them in 401(k) retirement accounts.

Financial firms will get greater leeway to offer advice to those 401(k) and IRA savers on how best to invest their retirement nest eggs.

Lawmakers singled out financially struggling airlines for help when drafting the new rules.

Airlines in bankruptcy proceedings that have frozen their pension plans, an act that stops participants from getting new benefits, get an extra 10 years to meet their funding obligations.

Man finds large fossil south of Oakley

By Jan Katz Ackerman

Colby Free Press

A Lawrence man is trying to have a Xiphactinus Audax fossil he found last month in Logan County declared the state's official fossil. A Xiphactinus Audax is a prehistoric fish.

Alan Deitrich, 58, returned earlier this week from hunting fossils in China. Deitrich is working to find the ancient fish a permanent home.

"My grandpa used to say cream rises to the top and it's the good stuff that rises to the top and ends up in a museum," Deitrich said.

Having found and unearthed the 18-foot Xiphactinus Audax in July in the chalk beds south of Oakley, Deitrich said heavy equipment owned by Jay and Arlo Sporer of Sporer Land Development made it possible to unearth all of the fish except the tail. How old the fossil is has not been determined.

The fossil is currently on a trailer in front of First Travel Inn, owned by Jim and Donna Smith of Oakley.



JASMINE CROTINGER/Colby Free Press

A Xiphactinus Audax fossil is possibly the largest example of its type ever found.

waiting to be taken to a museum for display.

Deitrich said the Xiphactinus Audax of Logan County is the largest one unearthed at one time in the history of paleontology. Calling it a "giant meat eating fish," Deitrich said the Xiphactinus Audax lived in an inland sea where reptiles lived.

"It's a shame Kansas doesn't have a state fossil," he said Thursday. "Kansas is one of the few states which doesn't have an official fossil."

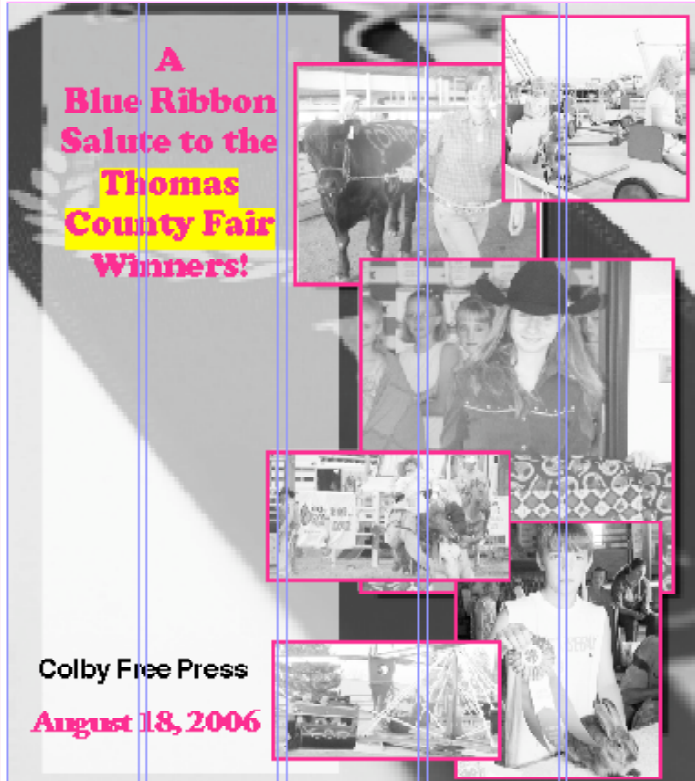
Deitrich was raised in Great Bend and has studied fossils since he was 10 years old. A graduate of Wichita State University, Deitrich is cur-

rently a student at the University of Kansas majoring in art.

Deitrich said the earth will one day be completely covered by water and named the fossil, Jonah, in honor of the great fish in the Bible.

"Historians say you have to understand the past to learn about the future," he said.

Special insert in today's edition 2006 Thomas County Fair Results



A Blue Ribbon Salute to the Thomas County Fair Winners!

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