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# USVI and Puerto Rico to Remain Drought-Free Through December, But Excessive Rainfall Will Continue to Impact Agriculture

**While water resources are replenished, NOAA warns of agricultural impacts, with crop losses, fungal outbreaks, and potential feed shortages affecting farmers**

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Impacts of TS Ernesto: flooded farmland in PR's Hormiguero (upper left), limited pasture access in Cabo Rojo, silt plumes in Hull Bay, STT (lower left), and grazing vegetation on Lane's Peak, STX. By. NOAA/NIDIS

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are expected to remain drought-free through the remainder of the year, with wetter-than-normal conditions persisting across the Caribbean

territories, according to a report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS). Tropical storms, including Ernesto, have brought significant rainfall, impacting agriculture and coastal waters, while the risk of drought remains low.

The organizations said that Tropical Cyclone Ernesto, along with other weather systems, has delivered substantial rainfall to both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in recent months. As of September 17, 2024, both territories are drought-free, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. This continuous rainfall has replenished water reservoirs, kept soil saturated, and elevated stream levels.

However, the heavy rains have not been without consequences. In Puerto Rico, July and August brought persistent downpours that led to flooding, landslides, and crop losses, particularly in areas with high humidity such as Vieques and Culebra. Farmers reported crop damage from increased moisture, including fungal outbreaks, while some regions in the southwest experienced dry patches.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, fruit trees and crops were similarly impacted by the combination of high winds and rains brought by Tropical Storm Ernesto. The storm also caused silt plumes in coastal waters, affecting fisheries in the region. Farmers across both territories are now facing the challenge of managing moisture-related issues while preparing for a continued wet pattern in the months ahead.

Puerto Rico has been drought-free since late April, while the USVI has seen no drought conditions since February. Rainfall amounts have consistently been above average, with some regions of Puerto Rico experiencing nearly 15 inches of rain in a 48-hour period due to Tropical Cyclone Ernesto, according to the report. In fact, areas in the interior and west of Puerto Rico have reported rainfall amounts over 16 inches above normal.

St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John have all seen heavy rainfall as well. Year-to-date, several areas of St. Croix and St. Thomas have accumulated over 50 inches of rain, leading to reports of localized flooding, NOAA and NIDIS made known.

Groundwater wells in the USVI, particularly in St. Croix, have also benefited from the continuous rainfall. Levels in the Adventure 28 Well in St. Croix have recovered to heights not seen since March 2021, highlighting the beneficial impact of recent precipitation.

The weather, while beneficial for replenishing water resources, has posed challenges for local agriculture. In Puerto Rico's central interior and northern regions, high humidity and intermittent dry periods have affected crops such as lettuce and other quick-harvest varieties. Farmers in Culebra and Vieques have noted increased weed growth and fungi outbreaks, including the Sigatoka fungus affecting banana and plantain crops.

Similarly, in the USVI, farmers reported crop losses, mold, and downed fruit trees as a result of Ernesto's passage. Livestock farmers in St. Croix are preparing for potential feed shortages in the hotter months ahead, despite the recent rains that have revitalized grazing lands.

The wet weather pattern is expected to continue through the fall and early winter months. According to the NOAA Climate Prediction Center, precipitation is forecasted to remain above normal across the Caribbean territories until the end of the calendar year. While no drought is anticipated, higher-than-average temperatures could increase evapotranspiration rates, potentially affecting isolated areas that may not receive as much rainfall.

The hurricane season will also continue to pose a threat, with conditions in the Main Development Region (between Africa and the Lesser Antilles) remaining conducive for tropical cyclone formation through the end of November. Although the peak of hurricane season has passed, the region is still vulnerable to storms developing in October and early November.

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are currently benefiting from ample rainfall and are expected to remain free of drought through the remainder of 2024. However, farmers and residents alike will need to manage the challenges brought on by excessive moisture, flooding, and potential future storms, according to the report.

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