‘THE RAIN’S GOT TO COME’: LEE COUNTY DROUGHT LEAVES FARMERS VULNERABLE

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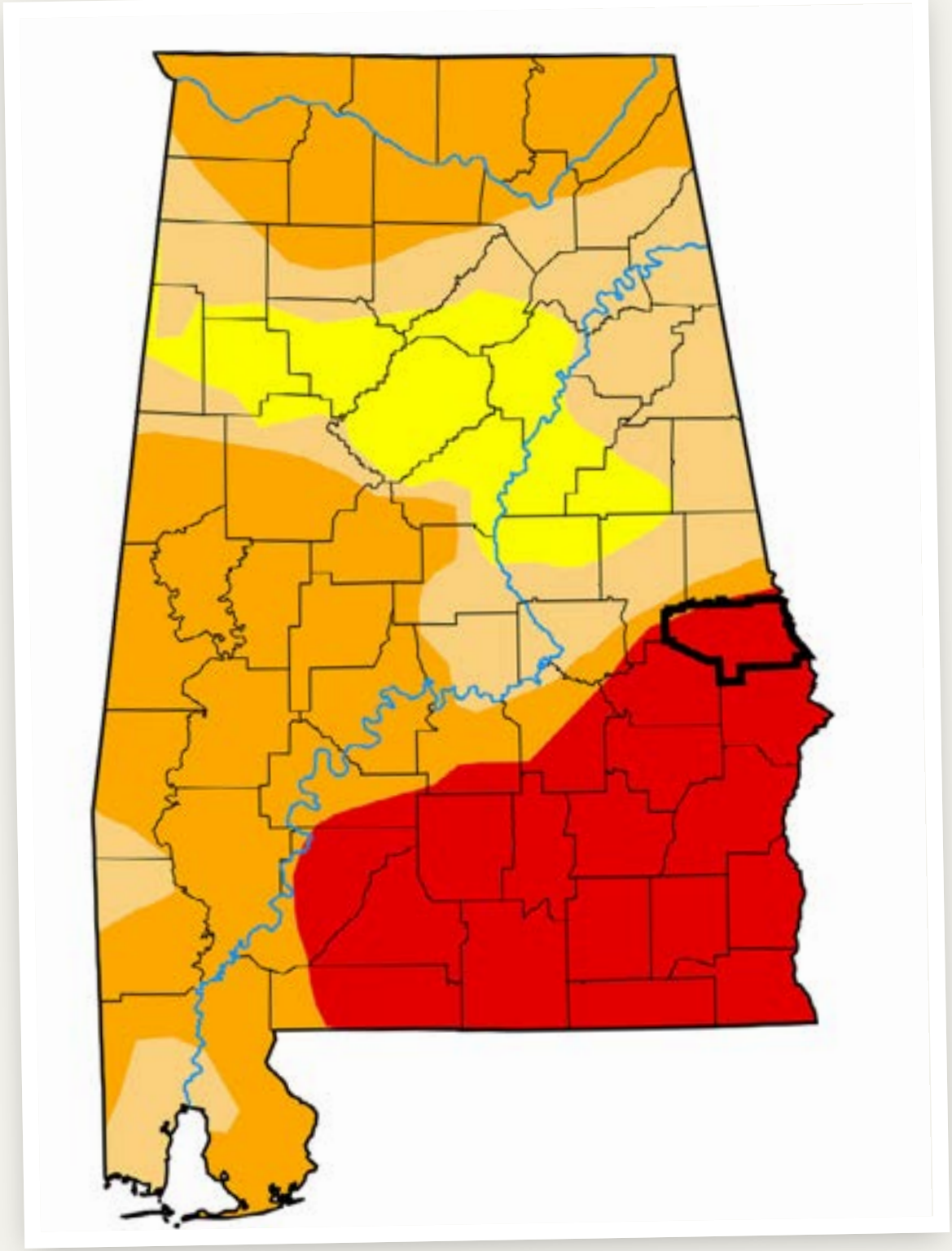
AUBURN, Ala. — When Robert Miller wakes up in the morning, he's listening for one thing: the sound of rainfall. Something as unpredictable as the weather forecast plays a major role in how his day turns out. For many residents of Auburn, no rain means more time outside. For crop farmers like Miller, it means disaster.

With an extreme drought spreading its way through Southeast Alabama, Lee County farmers find themselves with delayed production, profit loss and increased stress. With many farms across the state dependent on rainfall, prolonged months without sufficient rain can significantly reduce yields.

According to the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), droughts can cause a reduction in water availability and quality, something that is necessary for farmers in order to produce their yields. A sustained drought has "considerable" negative effects, like reduced production of crops and livestock.

NIDIS said the "non market impacts" on farmers can also include things like mental health strains on farmers.

The City of Auburn's Water Resource Management announced that the city was placed under a Phase 1 Drought Watch on Feb. 9. As of April 16, the conditions in Lee County, Ala. have developed to "Extreme Drought," or "D3," status according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.



A map of the state of Alabama, with Lee County outlined in black. Lee County is currently under a D3 Status. The U.S. Drought Monitor is jointly produced by the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the United States Department of Agriculture, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Map courtesy of NDMC.

Tim Johnson, Principal Engineer at the City of Auburn, Water Resource Management Department, works directly with the community when drought watches, warnings and other low-rainfall conditions occur.

According to their website, the goal of the Water Resource Management Department is to accurately manage the water quality of the city's water resources. The department also provides water and sewer services to citizens and businesses.

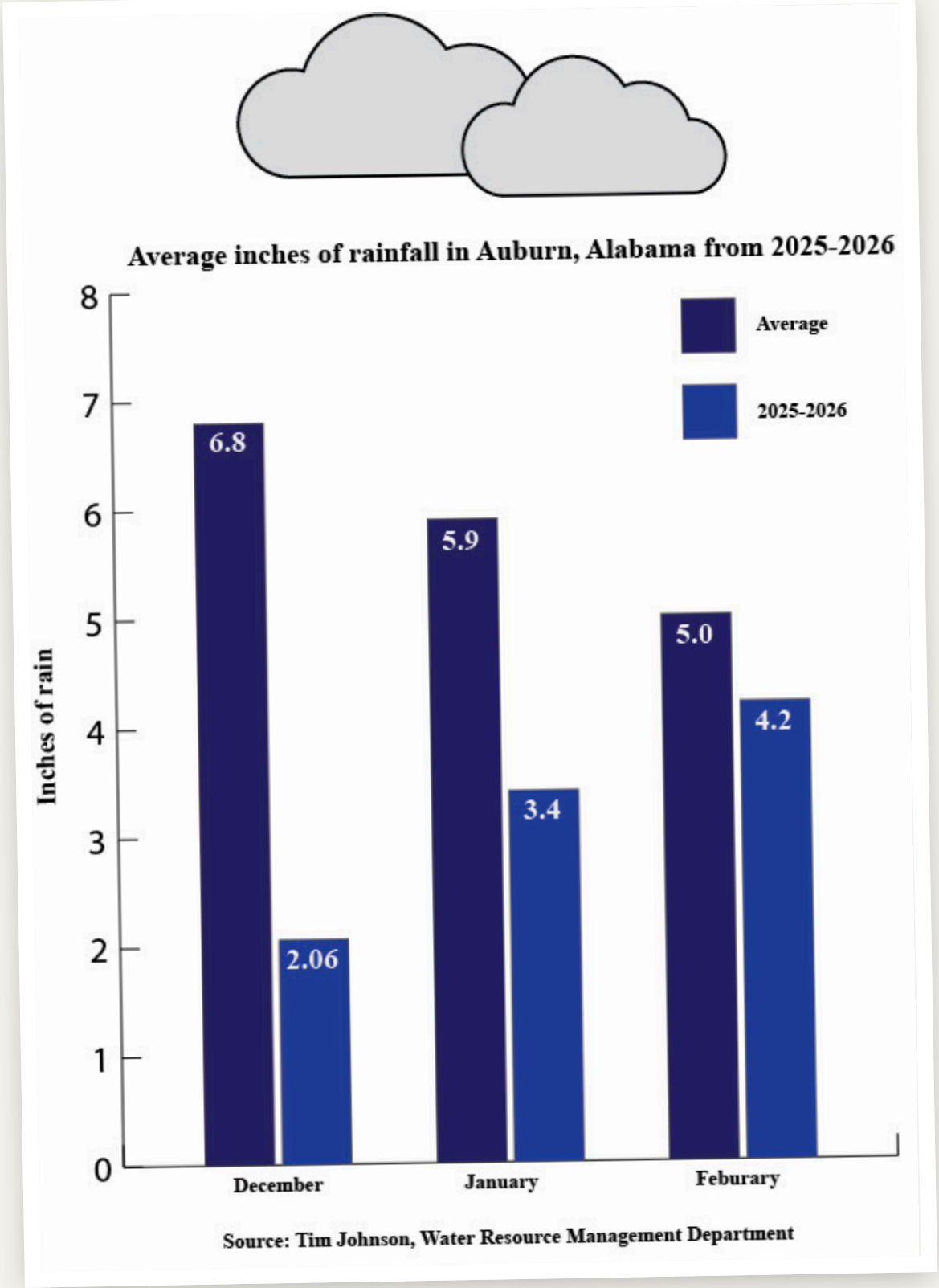


The Auburn City Water Works Building. Photo taken Feb. 17, 2026. (Photo by Luca Flores/The Auburn Plainsman)

Johnson said the City has experienced lower-than-average rainfall in the past 12 months, referencing data that the department holds from the last 10 years at Lake Ogletree.

According to Johnson, Auburn typically experiences the bulk of its rainfall in the late winter, early spring months like December, January and March. However, those months also experienced low inches of rain.

“In December, we averaged 6.8, we got 2.06, and it's continued since then. January 5.9, we got 3.4. In February, we averaged 5 and we got 4.2,” said Johnson. “We’re on pace for March to be a very dry month too. Right now we’ve got 2.5 inches of rainfall that we’ve recorded so far through March, so that's going to be well below average too.”



Graphic by Amanda Machamer. Created using Adobe Illustrator.

Lake Ogletree is rebounding from the drop in water levels, Johnson said. More rain is needed in the coming weeks to completely replenish the lake, but Johnson is confident in the upcoming weather in relieving some of the dryness.

“Our reservoir is on the rise, so to speak. So we just need a few more rain events and it would probably kind of fill it back up,” said Johnson.

Overall, Johnson said that the water resources are on track to recover from the dry season. Drought conditions are not atypical for the region, however, with similar circumstances seen in previous years.

“What we typically see is a fairly, you know, moderate to severe drought about every 10 years. Our last severe drought was in 2016,” said Johnson. “We did have a stretch in 2019 where it got really dry, but it was a little bit more short-lived. So this is, you know, the drought we’re seeing this year is kind of similar to that.”

A study titled “When Land Got Drier: Estimating the Impacts of Drought on Farmland Values in Alabama” by Yingyun Lin, Mykel R. Taylor and Sunjae Won examine this effect of droughts on farmers through an analysis of farmland values when droughts are present.

According to the study, the agricultural sector is the first group to feel the stress of a drought, with 83% of economic losses affecting agriculture. Specifically, crop farming and livestock raising.

A number of Lee County farmers crop farm or raise livestock, sometimes both, making the drought predominantly more difficult on those types of farming in the community.

95% of farms are family owned or partnerships in Alabama, making its small size particularly vulnerable to production risks, the study said. Many farms in Alabama also rely on “rain-fed,” farming systems, putting them at risk during droughts.

‘What happens if, you know, if it just really goes south?’

Robert Miller is part of that 95%, whose “rain-fed” farm sits on 400 acres of typically fertile soil, passed down for 100 years.

Miller originally went to school to become a lawyer, but was swayed by his grandfather to take over the family business. Since then, Miller has farmed for nearly 53 years, harvesting cotton, corn, cattle and hay. He has occasionally expanded to peanuts, soy beans, sesame and grain salt.

However, with drought conditions spanning the last three months, Miller has had to make some tough decisions, like whether or not to plant his field.

“We hardly had any rain. [We] didn’t get our money grazing planted on time because it was too dry, it wouldn’t come up, and we planted it probably a month late,” said Miller. “Then, you know, when it started to grow a little bit, we had two weeks of 20 degrees.”



Robert Miller's farm. Photo taken April 10, 2026. (Photo by Amanda Machamer)

The drought affects more than just Miller's crops, but his cattle too. Without hay, Miller does not have enough food to sustain his animals.

"We were afraid we were gonna deplete our hay, we usually make a lot of hay more than we need, and sell some," said Miller. "We sold no hay, we had to keep it all. Just because, you know, the dry weather."

Miller said the stress of being a farmer starts as soon as he wakes up, often listening for the sounds of rain hitting the roof.

"You wake up at night, and you can't go back to sleep without thinking about 'well, what happens? What happens if, you know, if it just really goes south?'" said Miller.

In 2000, Miller's farm faced a similar situation. He said they received little rain in the winter, and that trend continued during the summer.

"It was detrimental to our yields. I mean, you know, everybody in my area didn't make much yield and lost money there," said Miller.

Miller mentioned that the farming community as a whole is struggling to keep up with rising costs of equipment, combined with poor farming conditions. With those struggles comes intense amounts of stress, according to Miller.

"A lot of farmers are stressed because they have land to pay for. They have machinery to pay for. You know, and that's on top of just your inputs," said Miller.



Robert Miller's cattle, who he raises as a form of income. Photo taken April 10, 2026. Photo by Amanda Machamer

An article from the Journal of Rural Studies examined this stress that farmers experience. Achieved through a sample of six farmers in the West Midlands of the UK, the participants were required to have either worked on a farm or be a relative of someone who did.

The study found that one major cause of stress in these farmers is "professional-based helplessness," which is the lack of control in the farming profession, including financial struggles.

For Miller and other local farmers, these financial struggles partially stem from the extreme drought occurring throughout Lee County and other parts of Alabama.

'Don't let it eat you up.'

Just 30 minutes away in Marvyn, two farmers find themselves in a similar situation to Miller. Robert and Thomas Ingram, uncle and nephew, manage 700 acres of farmland. 200 of those are peanuts, with the remaining 500 dedicated to cotton.

The farm has been in the family since the 1830s, when Robert and Thomas' family moved to the area in 1836 from Georgia. Robert Ingram said someone in the family has been farming there ever since.

Robert Ingram said the farm experienced a "really good" cotton crop, just before he said the dry season started.

"At the end of July, it kind of quit raining around here, and the peanuts didn't fare so well. It just wasn't good weather for them to finish making, so the peanuts did really bad, actually," said Robert Ingram. "But the cotton did good, so it's just one of those things."

Since then, Robert Ingram said they haven't had much rain. The drought is so severe that they have not even begun to plant cotton, since the soil is too dry for anything to sprout.



Robert Ingram and Thomas Ingram's peanut and cotton harvesting equipment. Photo taken April 17, 2026. (Photo by Amanda Machamer)

“We’re waiting on rain to start planting,” said Robert Ingram. “Hopefully we get some in the next few days.”

If rain fails to come, Robert Ingram said that idea isn’t something they let themselves wrap their minds around.

“The rain’s got to come,” said Robert Ingram. “That’s a farmer’s mentality, it’s going to rain.”

Until the community experiences enough rain to support growth for the uncle and nephew’s crops, it’s a waiting game for them. A game that they said they have to play.

“We don’t have any other choice, really,” said Robert Ingram

The solution of irrigating the land during times of drought is not an option for the two farmers due to the land's rented status. Robert Ingram said he tries to not let the stress of farming get to him too much, instead trying his best to deal with it.

“It is what it is, and you know, there's nothing we can do to change it, so it’s just don’t even fret over it too much,” said Robert Ingram. “It’s taken me a long time to get there.”

Crop insurance is one strategy that the pair uses to protect their expenses in events like droughts. Robert Ingram said that the goal is to at least cover their input expenses, and less on making money.

“You’re not gonna make money with insurance, but it’s gonna keep you from losing so much money that you can’t survive," said Robert Ingram.

Overall, Robert Ingram said the key is accepting the reality that farming is often out of his control.

“It’s just getting to the mentality to, you know, realize it’s nothing to do about it, so just don’t let it eat you up,” said Robert Ingram.

Similar to Robert Miller, the Ingram’s farms also faced a difficult yield in 2000.

“We had an extremely dry year, and we had the worst cotton crop we ever had that year. We’re averaging around 1,000 pounds to the acre now. I think it was 136 pounds that year,” said Robert Ingram. It was a complete disaster that year.”

Robert Ingram and Thomas Ingram said they still have time to wait for the rain to come, with cotton planting typically set for the last week of April.



Robert Ingram and Thomas Ingram's workshop. Photo taken April 17, 2026. (Photo by Amanda Machamer)

Ashley Gann, public information officer for the Office of Institutional Compliance and Security, works to highlight safety resources for Auburn University, as well as communicating with students, faculty and parents during severe weather events.

Gann was also a former broadcast meteorologist, and worked with state emergency managers, and other industries like agriculture, which she said have been impacted by events like droughts.

The extreme drought, or D3 drought, in Lee County should be expected to improve in the coming months, according to Gann.

“When we are in different patterns, like an El Niño or La Niña, that will determine several years' patterns of drier trends or wetter trends,” said Gann.

These can last anywhere from five to seven years, according to Gann, which means that seasonal patterns of wet or dry conditions are to be expected and should not be considered uncommon.

Other influences like hurricane seasons also play a role in the type of rain patterns that the county experiences. Gann said that the most recent hurricane season was relatively quiet, stripping the area of what is typically one of the wettest seasons for the Southeast.

October to February is what Gann considers to be the driest time of the year, so going into those months without an elevated water table is only going to worsen the water shortage, which is what Gann said happened in the past months.

“I’m not concerned because I think once we start to get into late April and May, we’ll start to see those thunderstorms coming back and that will replenish our water cycle,” said Gann. “We might be in a bit of a dry trend over the next couple of years before we start to see more of a wetter pattern. Again, mostly based on the El Niño and La Niña trends.”

Other than the mental and economic strain on farmers, locals in the community might also start to feel the pressure on the agricultural sector.

According to the National Centers for Environmental Information, droughts rank third in environmental events causing over $1 billion in damages, sitting at $313.7 billion, just behind severe storms and tropical cyclones.

While experts say rain will return in the coming months, farmers that are already off schedule on planting value the timing just as much as the rain itself.

Now, farmers are forced to sit and wait for a shift in the forecast. Like Robert Ingram said, “the rain’s got to come.”

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