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*San Angelo
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Set for Feb. 14–Mar. 2

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**Remotely
Controlled
Ranch Gates**

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By Mike Mecke

Retired Natural Resources & Water Specialist
(830) 896-0805 mmecke@stx.rr.com

water

Water Woes Common, But is That Any Comfort?

Maybe the drought would be easier to take if washed down with a little Southern Comfort? Better get used to it straight. Branch water or “rocks” may become scarcer in coming years—heck, it is now in some not-so-lucky places. I will keep trying to pass on some water news and information “straight” too—just as I see it. Not to be negative, but as accurate as I can. I actually am a pretty positive person. You have to be to work 40 years in agriculture and natural resources. Also, mine are not views of water issues as seen through a politician’s, chambers of commerce’ or developers’ rose colored glasses. Water is too critical and too big an issue to play games with in giving the citizens the facts.

It has been a beautiful, chilly and sunny week across much of Texas. Sure, lots of folks are wheezing and sneezing across the Hill Country and in San Antonio or Austin because of the annual hit of “Cedar Fever.” Our way-too-common mountain cedar (blue-berry juniper, really) is the cause and the darned male trees and bushes are putting out huge clouds of orange pollen into the air. Sometimes, the hills look like they are on fire from it—which really would

be the best thing for allergies, our water supplies and our rangeland production! The last century and a half where we avidly controlled wildfires, fenced ranges and sometimes overstocked, has produced a perfect scene for a cedar/juniper brush explosion. The result is glaringly evident across the Edwards Plateau region and especially over the Hill Country segment. Green pastures, ranges and hills stretch as far as the eye can see, fooling the casual, uninformed observer. The green you see is not our good native grasses and forbs, but mostly cedar, liveoak or prickly pear patches.

Other than way, way too much cedar and brush on our ranges, we also have a large rainfall deficit going back several years. You do not make up a big drought water deficit with one or a few “average years.” Yes, 2013 was a decent rainfall year in Central Texas with some areas even getting “normal,” or close, rainfall totals.

Lots of ranges and roadsides were green this fall and some dryland small grain made good growth for winter grazing. Lots of folks are happy, thinking and saying, “Maybe the drought is over!” Most of these folks are transplant-Texans or young. They never went through the big drought of the ’50s. Or even the one of the ’30s that some of you have. Or the terrible drought of the teens as my dad did. Real, multi-year

droughts are not rare, even in our short, piddling lifetimes, let alone in human history.

Would our horrible federal deficit that feeds the debt be made up with one or a few “good years?” Not hardly; it is going to be with us and our kids—and grandkids, most likely—even if we elect a good Congress that passes sensible annual budgets and legislation. Our water budget is very much the same.

In my December article “Is the Drought over Yet?” I provided some discussion and quite a few facts demonstrating our continuing water deficit affecting our groundwater, springs, creeks and rivers, lakes, and finally, our gulf. Nothing has changed significantly in the past two months and isn’t likely to unless we get a couple of good, wet tropical storms next summer. Even tropical storms and hurricanes were in short supply last year as you might have noticed.

Most long-range climate experts (not carbon credit entrepreneur Al Gore) have pointed out that all of this change in weather patterns, storms, precipitation, temperatures, ocean temperatures, glacial melt, ice pack changes and other key measuring standards assessed collectively, seem to point to climate changes which likely have already begun.

Basically, for much of the U.S., especially the Southwest and West, we are told to expect “hotter and drier” years and weather with more extremes of climate than we are used to having.

I am sure no weather or climate expert, but with a lifetime of following weather



Photo by Ann Markman of Meridian, Texas, was an entry in the 2010 Ranch & Rural Living Photo Contest.

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and climate for effects upon local agriculture, water and wildlife, I have become something of a weather watcher. Maybe you are, too?

Thinking back over recent years, I remember weather extremes for tornados including more and larger tornados, more winter tornados and storms hitting places not commonly affected, like New England. Or, very bad floods in unexpected places while nearby locations were in drought. Huge snow storms seem to occur at wrong times of the year or in wrong places, while areas used to lots of snow go dry. Monster wildfires have occurred in recent years across Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona and California—mostly due to serious drought.

Watch the news today about California's latest major fire. Maps show almost the whole state is in critical drought stage with dry lakes, rivers and a 15 percent snowpack. Sure, three young idiots lit the match, but drought set the conditions. Snowpack, fellow Texans, is what fuels most of the rivers of the West, providing healthy rivers, lakes, agricultural water and drinking water in far away cities such as El Paso, Amarillo, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Francisco, etc. Without a healthy snowpack in the Rockies, Sierras and other mountains, it

could be a very tough and dry summer for many Americans.

We all need to become active in water related issues locally and in Austin. Conservation must become number one in all water planning efforts from your house to

the Governor's Mansion. Learn as much as you can about water issues, conservation methods and water quality. Encourage students to follow science careers.

As always, "The cheapest *new water* is the *water you save!*"

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