It's official: Part of central Nebraska now is experiencing the state's first exceptional drought–the most intense level–in eight years, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center.

The center, headquartered at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, reported findings in this week's U.S. Drought Monitor, its weekly report on drought conditions, which was released Thursday, July 26.

"The extreme drought in the central part of the state last week was intensified to exceptional on this map, and there was a broad intensification from severe to extreme drought in the state," said Brian Fuchs, a climatologist and U.S. Drought Monitor author.

Fuchs said the intense drought has come on fairly quickly. "In eight weeks, we went from being in fairly good condition to having the whole state in severe drought or worse."

Nebraska is not alone. This week's Drought Monitor set a record for the fourth straight week for the area in moderate drought or worse in the 12-year history of the map and showed widespread intensification of drought.

This week's map shows 53.44 percent of the United States and Puerto Rico in moderate drought or worse, up from 53.17 percent the week before; 38.11 percent in severe drought or worse, compared with 35.32 a week earlier; 17.2 percent in extreme drought or worse, compared with 11.32 percent; and 1.99 percent in exceptional drought, up from .83 percent.

"We've seen tremendous intensification of drought through Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Indiana, Arkansas, Kansas and Nebraska, and into part of Wyoming and South Dakota in the last week," Fuchs said. "The amount of D3 (extreme drought) developing in the country has increased quite a bit for each of the last several weeks."

Fuchs also noted that as of this week, every state in the country had at least a small area shown as abnormally dry or worse. "It's such a broad footprint," he said.

“This drought is two-pronged,” Fuchs said. “Not only the dryness but the heat is playing a big and important role. Even areas that have picked up rain are still suffering because of the heat.”

The forecast for most of the drought-affected area is for drought to continue to develop and intensify. “Conditions are likely to persist,” Fuchs said. “We’ll see further development and intensification into the fall.” Fuchs based his assessment on the Seasonal Drought Outlook released July 19.

Although the Drought Monitor has only a 12-year history, experts can put the 2012 drought into historical context by using the older Palmer Drought Severity Index, which has data back to 1895. By that measure, only droughts in 1934, 1939 and 1954 covered a larger area in the U.S.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service this week reported that almost 40 percent of the country’s agricultural land is in severe or worse drought. It is affecting 62 percent of farms, and about 88 percent of the corn crop and 73 percent of cattle areas.

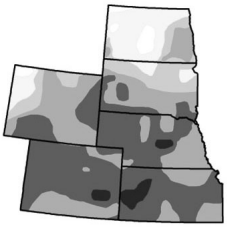
The U.S. Drought Monitor map is jointly produced by the National Drought Mitigation Center at UNL, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and about 350 drought observers across the country. It is released each Thursday based on data through the previous Tuesday.

Drought Monitor authors synthesize many drought indicators into a single map that identifies areas of the country that are abnormally dry (D0), in moderate drought (D1), in severe drought (D2), extreme drought (D3) and exceptional drought (D4).

Statistics for the percentage area in each category of drought are automatically added to the U.S. Drought Monitor website each week for the entire country and Puerto Rico, for the 48 contiguous states, for each climate region, and for individual states: http://drought.unl.edu/MonitoringTools/USDroughtMonitor/DroughtMonitorTips.aspx.

Drought Conditions (Percent Area)

	None	D0-D4	D1-D4	D2-D4	D3-D4	D4
Current	2.32	97.68	86.74	76.98	44.51	2.51
Last Week (07/17/2012 map)	3.52	96.48	85.88	68.44	28.07	1.35
3 Months Ago (04/24/2012 map)	43.85	56.15	25.85	5.70	0.00	0.00
Start of Calendar Year (12/27/2011 map)	61.66	38.34	18.12	7.22	2.07	0.04
Start of Water Year (09/27/2011 map)	70.09	29.91	17.44	11.97	6.22	2.96
One Year Ago (07/19/2011 map)	80.28	19.72	14.46	11.12	6.40	1.86



Intensity:

- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Drought - Moderate
- D2 Drought - Severe
- D3 Drought - Extreme
- D4 Drought - Exceptional

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. See accompanying text summary for forecast statements.

http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu

Released Thursday, July 26, 2012
Richard Heim, National Climatic Data Center, NOAA