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DROUGHT

The drought also has been intensifying in Kansas, the top U.S. producer of winter wheat. It also is entirely covered by drought, and the area in the worst stage rose nearly 4 percentage points to 34.5 percent as of Tuesday. Much of that increase was in southern Kansas, where rainfall has been 25 percent of normal over the past half year.

After a summer in which farmers watched helpless as their corn dried up in the heat and their soybeans became stunted, many are now worrying about their winter wheat.

It has come up at a rate on par with non-drought years, but the quality of the drop doesn't look good, according to the USDA. Nearly one-quarter of the winter wheat that germinated is in poor or very poor condition, an increase of 2 percentage points from the previous week and 9 percentage points worse than the same time in 2011. Forty-two percent of the plantings are described as in fair shape, the same as last week.

Farmers who might normally irrigate in such circumstances worry about low water levels in the rivers and reservoirs they use, and many are hoping for snow to ease the situation. But it would take a lot. About 20 inches of snow equals just an inch of actual water, and many areas have rain deficits of a foot or more.



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SHOPPING

That puts added pressure on brick-and-mortar stores, which can make up to 40 percent of their annual revenue during the holiday shopping season, to give consumers a compelling reason to leave their homes.

That's becoming more difficult: the National Retail Federation, an industry trade group, estimates that overall sales in November and December will rise 4.1 percent this year to \$586.1 billion, below last year's 5.6 percent growth.

But the online part of that is expected to rise 15 percent to \$68.4 billion, according to Forrester Research.

As a result, brick-and-mortar retailers have been trying everything they can to lure consumers into stores.

Some stores tested the earlier hours last year, but this year more retailers opened their doors late on Thanksgiving or at midnight on Black Friday.

In addition to expanding their hours, many also are offering free layaways and shipping, matching the cheaper prices of online rivals and updating their mobile shopping apps with more information.

"Every retailer wants to beat everyone else," said C. Britt Beemer, chairman of America's Research Group, a research firm based in Charleston, S.C. "Shoppers love it."

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