

was not good. It's not just the time spent away from others. We're constantly bombarded with political opinions, advertising pitches, and antiseptically-named "content." In so many ways, this pushes us to be suspicious, angry, and unhappy, both with others and with our own lives. This makes it harder to happily work and live with one another. As we spend more time in isolation (physically or mentally), becomes harder to overcome its effects.

We're not meant to live this way. This is beautifully illustrated in the new Tom Hanks film, "A Man Called Otto." You might have seen this film or read the book it's based on, but if not, I'll try not to spoil much. It is the story of a retiring Pittsburgh steelworker who is, in a word, grumpy. He's annoyed by his neighbors, a stray cat, UPS drivers, store clerks, and anyone and anything he encounters. But he's not JUST a jerk. It becomes clear that he's lonely. He's isolated himself and it has made him unhappier. He "retires" (a move that clearly wasn't his choice) and he loses one of the few sources of meaning in his life. The film shares the story of a young family moving in across the street from Otto and how it impacts him. From the young family to the aging neighbor couple to the overly cheery workout guy to the struggling teenager impacted by Otto's wife's teaching career, Otto's shell slowly cracks. It's no confluence of random events. This is the story of people who overcome a variety of societal forces to live in community with one another.

It's a powerful and timely message.

Last week, I wrote that rural revitalization is a farce if it does not strengthen the ties between individuals into better, healthier communities. Otto learns exactly what I'm talking about. People who live in isolation find less purpose in their own life. When they struggle with their purpose, they likely also struggle with bettering the world and the people around them. As Otto re-centered his purpose, it rubbed off on his neighbors and it influenced others.

As we learned during the pandemic, virtual interaction has some merits, but it is no substitute for the very real ties of community that are created in person. Our rural places will not grow stronger so long as we let society impose its isolating forces on us. We will grow stronger when we overcome those forces and make intentional effort to rebuild and strengthen our personal interactions. That is the lesson that Otto learned, much to his initial chagrin. It is a message that will restore our places into vibrant, healthy communities.

James Decker is the Mayor of Stamford, Texas and the creator of the West of 98 website and podcast. Contact James and subscribe to these essays at westof98.substack.com and subscribe to West of 98 wherever podcasts are found.

Water Weekly

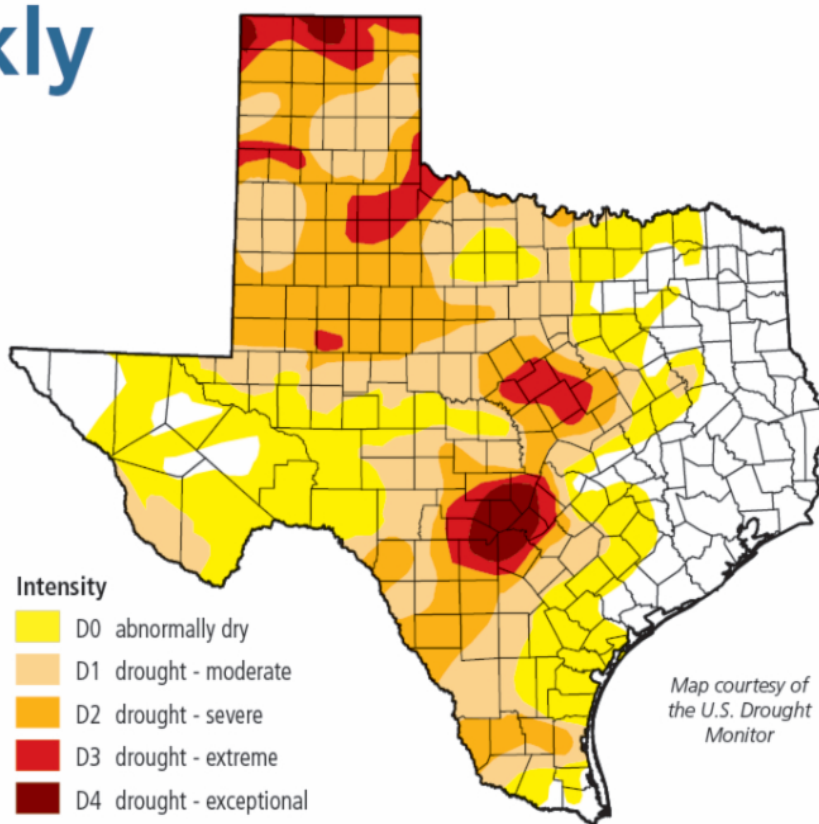
For the week of 02/13/23

Water conditions

The latest drought monitor map, for conditions as of February 7, shows little change from the previous week. The area of the state impacted by drought decreased by less than one percentage point. Nevertheless, it was the first time in 2023 that drought contracted in consecutive weeks.

Drought conditions

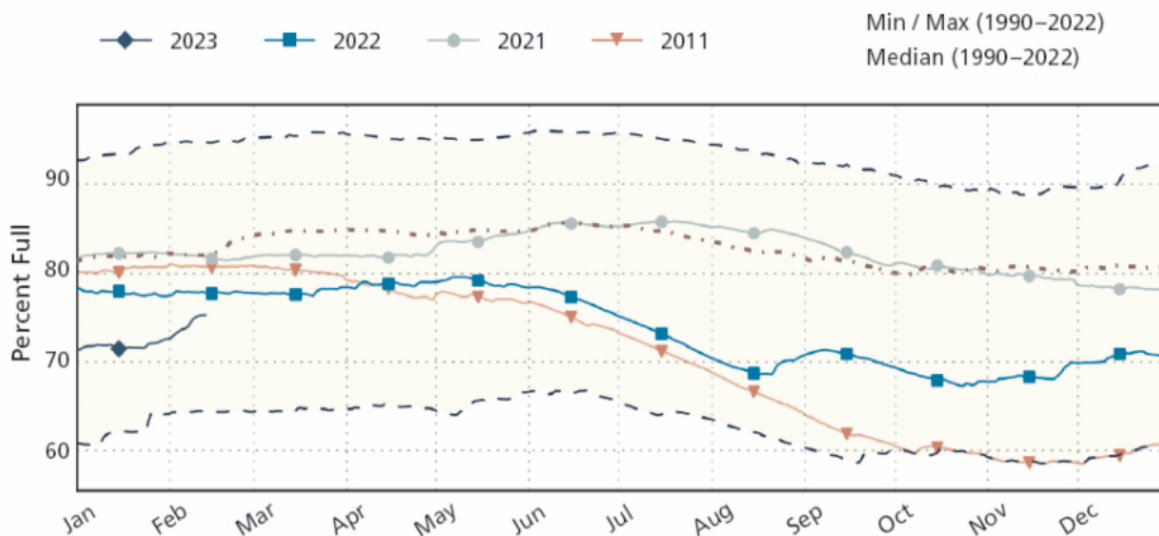
- ◆ 53% now
- ◆ 53% a week ago
- ◆ 65% three months ago
- ◆ 78% a year ago



Statewide reservoir storage

TWDB chart

In the last month, statewide surface water supply has increased by almost four percent of capacity (about 1.2 million acre-feet). Supplies in East Texas reservoirs have increased by more than 800,000 acre-feet since mid-January. Supplies in South Texas have declined by nearly 300,000 acre-feet over the same time period.



Written by Dr. Mark Wentzel — Dr. Mark Wentzel is a hydrologist in the TWDB's Office of Water Science and Conservation.

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