

>> leaving about 97% of the state in either extreme or exceptional drought, the two worst classifications.

Heat added to the misery. Texas, as well as Oklahoma, Louisiana and New Mexico, experienced the hottest summer since record-keeping began in 1895. Even crop insurance indemnity payments set a U.S. record at \$10.3 billion, with \$2.5 billion paid out in Texas alone, where, according to the USDA, only 57% of crops planted were harvested. Up north, Canada experienced a relatively mild year in 2011, but this after a drought hit parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 2009.

As for those fires in Texas, the 2011 fire season saw 30,459 wildfires that burned 3,992,288 acres by its official end on October 31. More than 3,000 homes and 2,800 other buildings were destroyed. Protecting the state's land and homes were approximately 3,000 firefighters, says Koenig, about 80% of whom were volunteers, many of them farmers with a special connection to the land and what quenches its thirst.

Things in Texas are looking up, though, at least for the moment. Cloudy skies brought much-needed rain earlier this year. Still, long-term climate models suggest drought—and its partner-in-crime, wildfires—aren't a thing of the past.

"When an event happens," he notes, "whether it's a wildfire or whatever, the first line of attack is the volunteer firefighter." To them, we say thanks.

Aiming For Fun

ALONG THE MINNESOTA and Wisconsin border region, things get a little, well, explosive come spring and summer. That's thanks, in part, to Ron Olson, owner of Scheidegger Implement, the Massey Ferguson dealer in the beautiful Buffalo County valley of Waumandee, Wis. He has a love for things that go "boom," and he likes to share.

For Ron and his neighbors, things get started in late May, when he loads up a specially made "pumpkin cannon" and hits the local parade circuit. However, instead of large, round orange fruit, he shoots small plastic balls. "They just fly all over," Olson says. The little bouncy orbs subsequently rain down on the streets and sidewalks along the route, as young parade watchers chase them with glee.

"We buy about 400 balls for each parade and shoot them about 20 at a time," Olson says of the cannon. Two of his customers, Rick Reuter and John Sendelbach, both native to the Waumandee valley, made the cannon. The air reservoir is an old anhydrous tank, and the under carriage was made from a manure spreader. Olson pushes the cannon with a compact Massey Ferguson tractor. "It's entertaining, to say the least," Olson says, chuckling.

During recent summers, Olson and crew have operated the cannon in three parades, the final one on the Fourth of July. Olson then finishes off Independence Day with a celebration at Scheidegger Implement, the dealership that's been in his family for three generations. Olson's father started the fireworks display in 1989; about 30 people showed up. Now, with hot dogs provided by the local Waumandee State Bank and ice cream sponsored by the Buffalo County Dairy Promotion Committee, plus patriotic music—in addition to things that go boom—some 2,000 to 2,500 people have attended the gathering in recent years.

"It's grown tremendously," Olson says, "and I'm happy to throw the party. It's just a great time!"



Cow's Calling

A NEW "TEXTING COW" technology can measure an animal's movements in three dimensions and send alerts via wireless technology, including mobile phones and Internet. To do so, the new system, which is being developed in the United Kingdom under the name Silent Herdsman, uses a sensor similar to those in Nintendo's Wii gaming controllers.

According to reports in the British

PHOTOS: COWS AND PHONE, AP/WORLDWIDE; TRACTOR CANNON, ERIN MARIE OLSON;