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Climate Change and Drought, Connected or Not?

Before we can understand how climate change and drought are connected, we first need to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Climate Change refers to long-term shifts in Earth's temperature and weather patterns due to human activities. It's not about a single harsh winter or unusually hot summer; it's about measurable trends over decades. Since the 1850s, Earth's average surface temperature has risen by roughly 2°F, with 2024 being the warmest year on record¹. That number might sound small until you remember it's a global average. It's less "slightly warmer vibes" and more like adjusting the thermostat for the entire planet. The primary driver of modern climate change is the increase in greenhouse gases caused by burning fossil fuels, deforestation, agriculture, and industrial processes. A warming climate means more than just year-long bikini season. Warmer air can hold more moisture, which means some regions experience heavier downpours and flooding. At the same time, higher temperatures increase evaporation, which dries out soils and vegetation more quickly. In short, wet places can get wetter, while dry places often get drier.

Drought refers to a prolonged period of below-average precipitation, but it involves more than simply a lack of rain. Drought can include reduced soil moisture, declining streamflow, shrinking groundwater supplies, and stressed ecosystems. In other words, drought isn't just about rain taking a few sick days, it's about the entire water system running on fumes. So, if someone says, "It rained yesterday, so we're not in a drought," that's like saying, "I drank water yesterday, so I can run a marathon without hydrating." True drought conditions develop slowly and can take months or even years to recover from. Drought happens naturally, but heat makes drought worse. Warmer air increases evaporation and pulls more moisture from soil and plants, essentially making the atmosphere thirstier. Even if rainfall doesn't dramatically decrease, higher temperatures can intensify drying, worsening drought conditions.

Climate Change and Drought Continued...

With that in mind, the connection between climate change and drought becomes clear. Scientists have found that rising global temperatures caused by climate change accelerate drought severity. A 2024 study found that evaporation accounted for more drought severity than lack of rainfall itself in droughts since 2000. This study predicts that droughts will last longer and become more severe as the climate warms². A 2025 study elaborates on this with findings suggesting that evaporation demands increased drought severity by an average of 40% between 1901 and 2022³.

These trends are not just global, they are visible locally as well. WGLT has reported moderate droughts and/or record-breaking dry seasons in McLean County occurring in different seasons in each year from 2023 to 2026^{4,5,6,7}. On March 4, 2026 McLean County was in a drought with 57% of the population in an extreme drought according to the National Integrated Drought Information System⁸. Despite online speculation, this drought was not caused by data centers. At this time there are only two existing data centers in our community—these facilities do not cause droughts, just exacerbate the issue by increasing water demands.

While communities cannot stop a drought overnight, residents can help reduce water stress during dry periods. Simple actions like taking shorter showers, collecting rainwater for outdoor plants, and only running full loads of laundry or dishes can make a difference. However, droughts will continue to get worse than ever before due to climate change. There are many actions you can take locally to slow down climate change but first, try understanding your carbon footprint by using a free carbon footprint calculator like www.footprintcalculator.org/home/en. Once you understand your current footprint make a goal and stick to it. Come back in a month, recalculate your footprint and see the difference your actions made. Small changes add up. As a community, we can make a difference in the fight against climate change.

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Sources for Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking.

1. "NETN Species Spotlight - Serviceberry" *North East Temperate Network Inventory & Monitoring Division*, July 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/netn-species-spotlight-serviceberry.htm>.

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Florals? For spring? Groundbreaking.

Spring is in the air, and that means we will soon be seeing color again in the landscape! This month I challenge you to take notice of some native flowering trees that are sure to be somewhere in your neighborhood or on your commute! Let's get into it!

Serviceberry *Amelanchier laevis* or *Amelanchier arborea*

Serviceberry trees are known to be among the first blooms of spring, and you'll notice when it happens. The full tree of flowers will emerge all at once, and all the serviceberries in town will bloom at the same time!! This makes serviceberries a reliable favorite for pollinators. Their berries ripen from June to August and are edible to humans, but you'll have to move quickly to beat the birds to them.¹ Native birds love them, especially cedar waxwings!¹ How to spot: Serviceberry trees can be single or multi-stem. Their flowers are white with five tiny petals splayed out like a star. Their berries are red and turn purple when they are ripe enough to eat!



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Redbud *Cercis canadensis*

Redbud trees are popular in urban areas for good reason. They're small, versatile, and striking in all seasons; making them the perfect landscaping tree.

How to spot: Redbuds are small trees that can be single or multi-stem. They have small pink to magenta flowers dotting the length of their stems, offering a full display of color. Redbud trees are in the legume family, and as such their flowers resemble pea flowers when inspected up close. They will develop heart shaped leaves, and brown bean pods in autumn.

Pagoda Dogwood *Cornus alternifolia*

Dogwood trees are unique in structure, with horizontal layered branching resembling midcentury modern architecture. They often grow to only about 15ft, but their canopy can grow equally as wide.

How to spot: The native variety has white flowers that look like fluffy puffballs from a distance. You may notice a four petal white blossom but those are actually 'bracts' or leaves protecting the small flowers in the middle².



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Spring into Energy Savings, and Ahead of Summer Spikes

Spring is finally right around the corner, with the blooming flowers and brighter days being a welcome reprieve from the freezing winter days, as well as high heating bills. While spring can bring some relief to energy bills, it also means that high summer cooling bills are creeping closer. While an increased summer electric rate is normal¹, the summer of 2025 saw an unprecedented rate hike in Central Illinois, with Ameren territory seeing a rate increase of 18% to 22%².

Unfortunately, this trend may continue into this upcoming summer. The Citizen's Utility Board (CUB) recently expressed concern that prices will spike again starting in June 2026, due to a variety of factors, the impact of data centers being one of them³. While the prospect of another bill increase is concerning, thankfully there are many options available to not only save you money right now, but to get ahead of any possible rate hikes before they happen. Many of them are offered by organizations such as the Ecology Action Center!

Energy Efficiency and Audits

An easy and impactful option to save on energy costs is assessing your home or business's energy efficiency via a BNEnergyBright energy audit. A building is a complex system, and a BNEnergyBright energy audit takes a comprehensive look at your home or business to determine what factors may be causing it to use excess energy. Examples include: poor insulation, air leaks, inefficient appliances, etc.

A report will then be sent to you with recommended actions to address these energy issues, along with financial resources to help with the cost of these actions. The cheapest energy is the one you never have to use, and an energy audit details what to do to ensure your home uses the least energy possible, saving you money no matter the season, or the rate.

Community Solar

Another easy option is signing up for community solar! The EAC has partnered with PureSky Energy to offer a community solar program for Bloomington-Normal. Instead of installing panels on your roof, community solar subscribes you to a portion of a local solar array, which will supply a portion of your electricity. This will show up as a credit on your monthly electric bill, with a guaranteed 10% savings on your costs. There is no cost to subscribe to the program, and no penalty for leaving; this is purely a savings program for homeowners, renters, business owners, and community organizations. Currently, there are 30 slots remaining on our local array. For more information on eligibility and how to sign-up, visit bnenergybright.org/energy-audit-sign-up, or contact EAC Energy Coordinator, Michael Bay.

Municipal Aggregation

Bloomington and Normal residents can participate in municipal aggregation, which locks in one electricity rate throughout the year, or for the duration of the contract between the municipalities and the electricity supplier. This rate is typically cheaper and more stable than Ameren's rate, and a new aggregation rate will soon be negotiated for 2026. The EAC will inform residents about this rate as soon as information is available, having previously recommended aggregation as a cheaper option for the 2025 summer season.

Sources for Spring into Energy Savings, and Ahead of Summer Spikes

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Plastic Bag Recycling

Plastic bags may look innocent, but when they are put into the recycling cart, they turn into full-blown troublemakers! Plastic bags include grocery bags, bread bags, dry cleaner bags, and even garbage bags used to bag up the recycling are major issues for recycling sorting facilities. When asked about the top contaminants found in recycling carts, plastic bags make the list! These thin, stretchy plastics are known as "tangles" because they wrap themselves around recycling machinery, forcing facilities to shut down equipment so workers can cut them loose. This costs the facility time and money, and could be dangerous for workers.

The good news is that plastic bags aren't a lost cause! Many grocery stores and big-box stores have special drop-off bins near their entrances where clean, dry stretchable plastics (bags, bubble wrap, resealable bags, bubble mailers, etc.) can be recycled properly and turned into new products like composite lumber. Locally, stores like Meijer, Walmart, Kroger, and more have collection containers. To see a full list of stores, visit [RecycleBN.org](https://www.recyclebn.org).

So, the next time you're tempted to toss that bag into the recycling bin, remember to take it back to the store instead or bring your own reusable bags to avoid the problem all together.



Figure 1: Plastic bags and other tangles wrapped around recycling sorting machinery. Machinery from above was taken from Midwest Fiber, the local sorting facility for Bloomington-Normal and other Midwest communities.



COME PLANT TREES WITH US!

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