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Hydrological extremes in the media: The 2015 drought event in Germany

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The 2003 drought event had major implications on many societal sectors, including energy production, health, forestry and agriculture. The reduced availability of water accompanied by high temperatures led to substantial economic losses in Germany on the order of 1.5 Billion Euros, in agriculture alone. Furthermore, soil droughts have considerable impacts on ecosystems, forest fires and water management.

In 2015, another drought event impacted Germany which had impacts on inland navigation, forest fire risk and agriculture among others. Due to this drought event, corn yield reduced by 22% compared to the preceding 5 years. This drought event was tracked by the 2014 implemented German Drought Monitor, a near real-time, online soil water monitoring platform (Zink et al., 2016). This platform uses an high resolution, operational modeling system which delivers easy to understand maps of soil drought conditions that are published on a daily basis on www.ufz.de/droughtmonitor.

During the 2015 event, the German Drought Monitor was used by several regional to national newspapers as well as by television to inform the public about the recent status of soil moisture conditions. Next to publishing the drought maps, we were asked to comment the drought development and especially the severity of the ongoing drought event. On the one hand, this gave us the opportunity to inform the public about different types and the characterization of droughts. On the other hand, some journalists just tried to invoke statements such as “this is the most severe drought event ever recorded” to get a good headline. Further the secondmost pressing question of the journalists was, if the current event could be directly attributed to climate change. A clear answer to this question could not be given since the drought monitor is based on only a 65 year period of data. Depending on the media company, different depths of information and knowledge was finally transferred to the newsletter article and thus the public. In conclusion, the German Drought Monitor is the most objective instrument to assess agricultural droughts in Germany.