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Anderson, Oconee, Pickens drought status now severe

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COLUMBIA — Members of the S.C. Drought Response Committee, meeting via tele-conference on Tuesday, upgraded six counties in the Upper Savannah Basin to severe status. Those counties include: Oconee, Pickens, Anderson, Abbeville, McCormick and Edgefield. All other counties in the state remain at moderate drought status.

The committee upgraded the drought status for the six counties due to concerns about deficit levels in the upper Savannah lakes of Jocassee, Keowee, Hartwell and Thurmond. Low stream flow in the basin such as Little River and the Chattooga was also a factor in the decision to upgrade, according to a statement from the committee.

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Drought Contingency Plan, the Savannah River Lakes are in drought trigger level 2. Based on the dry conditions and forecast for below normal winter precipitation the projected elevations put the basin at drought level 3 by mid-January.

Jason Ward, hydrologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah River Basin Water Management, said, "The corps reservoir levels in the Savannah Basin are continuing to decline due to inflows near 10 percent of normal. Releases are being held to the minimum levels in our drought contingency plan to conserve water."

Scott Harder, S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) hydrologist, said that stream-flow conditions across the state continue to run below normal for this time of year. Drought conditions have been most severe in the Upper Savannah Basin, where stream flows have been well below normal for much of the summer and fall.

Harder also reported that most major lakes around the state are below their target level with Jocassee, Hartwell and Thurmond lakes the hardest hit.

David Tompkins with the S.C. Department of Agriculture said, "The growing season in South Carolina is wrapping up so we don't have drought to contend with, but the problem we face is with ponds and irrigation. All of those need to recharge over the winter or we face water problems in the spring."

Darryl Jones with the S.C. Forestry Commission said, "Based on the long-term deficit of rainfall, we are very concerned about the upcoming wildfire season. Some parts of the state are already very dry and recent frosts have helped to dry out grasses, leaves and other light fuels where most wildfires start. The seasonal outlook for the next few months indicates an increasing potential for high wildfire activity in most of South Carolina. Wildfire occurrence picks up in fall and winter, and during the upcoming holidays there will be more people cleaning up their yards and enjoying the outdoors.

Last year more than 96 percent of the wildfires in South Carolina were human-caused, including fires started from escaped leaf burns, woods arson, and equipment use. We encourage everyone to be very careful with fire, especially during the ongoing drought."

Dennis Chastain, West Drought Management Area committee member, said, "If the dry weather forecast follows through as predicted for this fall and winter and we don't get groundwater, surface water recharge, then the state may be facing a serious problem in the spring."

Hope Mizzell, SC State Climatologist said, "For the second winter in a row, La Niña is expected to influence weather patterns across the country. NOAA expects La Nina, which returned in August, to gradually strengthen and continue through the upcoming winter, which typically results in a drier than normal winter for South Carolina." La Nina is associated with cooler than normal water temperatures in the tropical Pacific Ocean, which influences weather throughout the world. It's the opposite of El Nino in which warmer ocean temperatures are seen in the same region.

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