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Board declares no change in state's drought status

By Anna Mitchell

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ANDERSON — Showers across the state of South Carolina last week have done little more than delay the inevitable, a state drought committee agreed Thursday.

The Department of Natural Resource's drought committee meets every few weeks as needed, and its members voted by conference call to keep the drought status as "moderate" in regions all across the state, though conditions in some counties have worsened to a severe drought stage, officials said.

State data showed rainfall in Anderson County ranged from 2.51 inches in the Iva area to 6.39 inches in Townville. The average countywide was about 4 inches, but Hartwell Lake fell about an inch and a half anyway.

Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System, said he would have expected Hartwell Lake to rise some under those circumstances, but said he thinks he understands after looking at multiple data sets. Drought conditions south of Anderson County are severe, he said, and water flowing out of Hartwell is helping balance the water levels at Thurmond Lake near McCormick County. McCormick County is among the driest in the state.

"A lot of that is they haven't had rain in the mid-basin of the Savannah River," Willett said. "There's no flow at Little River around McCormick. So they are releasing more out of Hartwell than they normally would."

Like Corps of Engineers officials last week, Willett said dry soil soaked up much of the rainfall before it had a chance to flow into the lake's tributaries.

State climatologist Hope Mizzell said one of those tributaries, Twelve Mile Creek, did spike immediately after the rainfall but fell quickly, too.

"Twelve Mile was not able to recover above its median level and already is dropping back down," she said.

Hartwell Lake remains about seven feet below full pool. Mizzell said she could hardly believe it.

"I guess we at least didn't lose a lot," she said.

The slight decrease at Hartwell, she said, "is not good news."

"Most lakes in the state recovered a foot or more," she said.

Lakes in the middle of the state, meanwhile, remain close to full, with Lake Murray at 1.85 feet down and Lake Greenwood a quarter of a foot down.

Mizzell and other weather experts said the long-term trend for the winter continues to look dry.

Thurmond is at eight feet below full pool. Lake Jocassee, which is operated by power giant Duke Energy, remains the most severely affected in the state at nearly 20 feet below full pool. Jocassee functions to keep Keowee, which is just downstream and supplies a nuclear power plant, within five feet of full under any conditions.

In any event, state water experts agreed, last week's rainfall was a fluke and won't stave off more severe drought conditions for long. Committee members agreed to meet again in three weeks to see if a "severe" rating is merited.

Willett said he might have considered recommending a severe status now, but the public would find that hard to believe so soon after showers that have brought lawns in the region back to life.

Should the state board declare drought conditions severe, he said, that could trigger water restrictions in some water districts. Cooler weather in October and declining interest in watering lawns, he said, will reduce demand anyway.

"In October there's not a lot you can do," Willett said. "We aren't expecting a lot of outdoor use."



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