Despite drought, progress made against Pinnacle fire

INDEPENDENT MAIL

The state's Drought Response Committee upgraded most of the southern half of the state Thursday, while fire crews continued their progress toward getting the Pinnacle Mountain fire under control.

All counties in the southern portion of the state have been upgraded from normal to incipient, the first level of drought. The coastal counties in the Lower Savannah River Basin of the state have also been upgraded to incipient.

"It's hard to believe that, in early October, many of these counties received more than ten inches of rain," said Hope Mizzell, DNR's State Climatologist Hope Mizzell. "But with no rain since then, they've now slipped into a drought."

All other counties – including those in the Upstate – maintained their current drought levels. The severe drought in the Upstate has played a big role in the Pinnacle Mountain fire and, according to the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC), the benefits from this week's rain may only be temporary.

"Long-range predictions continue to show above-normal wildfire potential through the month of December," SCFC Fire Duty Officer Doug Mills said. "The concern for wildfires will be exasperated by leaf fall occurring on top of already-dry fuels, creating yet another layer of fuel in the short term. Normal winter conditions are expected to prevail in January and February with occasional periods of increased fire activity."

The Pinnacle Mountain Fire has grown to 10,560 acres, the third-largest in state history, and sat at 84 percent containment Friday after overnight flyovers to look for hot spots. All burn bans have been lifted. The current expense of the fire is an estimated $4.57 million.

Farmers statewide are facing issues with their crops and livestock. The state's Department of Agriculture is encouraging farmers to use the hay exchange on its website or in the Market Bulletin as yields across the board are mixed due to both the drought and the effects of Hurricane Matthew.

"There's not much forage for grazing and farmers have not been able to plant for winter grazing," Assistant Commissioner Aaron Wood stated. "While drier conditions have allowed row crop harvest to progress ahead of schedule, annual small grain planting and forage stockpiling are well below normal due to a lack of soil moisture.

"From an agricultural perspective, the drought is becoming more severe, respectively, across the state," Wood continued. "But since we're at the end of the growing season, we're hoping that the rain forecasted over the next 14 days materializes."

Some members of the committee have lived in South Carolina for decades and say they have never seen a drought of this magnitude.

"I wish we had a drought designation that was called profound because this is one of the most profound droughts I've ever experienced," said Dennis Chastain. "It's probably going to get worse before it gets better but, because of the time of the year, we're going take a look in a couple of weeks."