Drought conditions slow to improve

BY MIKE EADS
THE JOURNAL

Drought conditions in the Upstate have eased a bit, thanks to the recent stormy weather, but it will take a while longer to get back to normal.

State officials updated the media Thursday about the state's ongoing drought and prospects for a break in dry conditions. They revealed that temperatures and rainfall should be at or slightly above seasonal norms for the next few months, then give way to a much rainier fall and winter than last year.

The weather changes won't come soon enough to raise local lake levels back to normal this season. Duke Energy has an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers that requires it to release accumulated water downstream, so it's going to take a lot more rain to get Lake Jocassee back to normal.

"As long as the rainfall is not sufficient, I think Jocassee is staying where it is," said George Galleher, an engineer for Duke Energy.

Lake Jocassee is currently down 22 feet. Lake Keowee is not as bad off, down 3.5 feet from normal and Lake Hartwell is just 9.72 feet below normal.

State Department of Natural Resources estimates line up with Galleher's comments, seeing little improvement in the Upper Savannah River basin in the next few months, which includes the aforementioned lakes.

State climatologist Hope Mizell says weather patterns will slowly shift from a "La Nina" pattern — which means cooler water temperatures in Pacific Ocean that upset global weather and lead to warmer temperatures and less rain in the Southeast U.S. — to an "El Nino" — which means warmer ocean water and more rain and lower temperatures for the Southeast.

That trend "honestly is good news for us ... that will play a factor in hurricane season and potential for winter rainfall," Mizell said. "La Nina is not our friend because it brings us too much drought."

Extreme drought conditions will continue in the southwest corner of the state, with gradual easing for the Upstate and Coastal Plain by early fall, according to Mizell.

meads@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685