Drought remains after rains

Upstate status still moderate, lakes low

By Anna Simon
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The Upstate remains in moderate drought status, state Climatologist Hope Mizzell told GreenvilleOnline.com after the state Drought Response Committee met Thursday.

Three weeks ago, the committee responded to increasingly dry conditions by raising drought status in the Upstate from incipient, which is the initial stage of drought, to moderate. There had been consideration of increasing drier parts of the Upstate to severe drought, the third of the state's four drought categories.

All counties of the state are being maintained at moderate drought status, Mizzell said.

Despite the recent rain that put the green back into Upstate lawns, the committee maintained moderate drought status due to concern that the rain last week was only a fluke in a drier-than-normal pattern predicted for this fall and winter, said Doug Young, a Lake Hartwell resident and member of the committee.

Young was at Lake Jocassee on Wednesday and was concerned but not surprised to see how low it had dropped. The lake was 20.4 feet below full pool Thursday, according to Duke Energy data.

"I've seen it 20 feet down before," said Young, who worries about the predicted dry weather ahead. Forecasts show no rain for the next 10 days at his home near Westminster, he said.

Before the rain, "We were descending into a serious drought situation," said Dennis Chastain, a northern Pickens County resident on the drought committee.

"Mother Nature grabbed us by the collar and pulled us back from the brink. I don't think anybody saw this rainy spell coming, but it has changed the drought picture in our favor, at least for the near term."

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The "real question" is whether "the spell has been broken," Chastain said. "A La Nina has reformed in the Pacific, and we will just have to wait and see how the fall and winter plays out."

Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System, said the rain may have only postponed an inevitable drought increase, especially in the Savannah River Basin.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported little improvement to lakes Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond. The soaking rain improved upper soil moisture, but reservoirs won't respond significantly until the soil is saturated. With no rain in the forecast for the next week, lake levels will likely continue to decline, according to Corps reports.

Prior to the rain, stream flows were low in Duke Energy's service area including the Catawba-Wateree River, Upper Broad River and the Keowee-Toxaway River Basins, according to George Galleher, Duke's Hydro Fleet Operations engineer.

With forecasts for below average precipitation stretching into the winter, lake storage, particularly in the Kewoee-Toxaway Basin that includes lakes Keowee and Jocassee, could be expected to gradually decline.

For farmers, the biggest concern now is grasses for livestock grazing as cold weather sets in, David Tompkins of the state Department of Agriculture told the committee.

Doug Mills, of the state Forestry Commission, said the rain reduced the number of fires, however a moisture deficit going into fall when leaves fall and plants go dormant coupled with drought means fire risk will be high through the fall.

Conditions will continue to be monitored and the committee will meet again in three weeks, Mizzell said.