Drought worsens across entire state

Panel fears repeat of 2008-2009 severity

By Nathaniel Cary
Staff Writer
ncary@greenvillenews.com

During a time of the year when significant rain normally recharges the Upstate's streams and reservoirs, the opposite is happening.

It's actually getting worse, experts said.

The South Carolina Drought Committee upgraded the drought status of every single county statewide Tuesday, and some members of the committee are concerned that the Savannah River Basin may slip into a repeat of the severe 2008-2009 drought.

Twelve counties — Oconee, Pickens, Anderson, Abbeville, McCormick, Greenwood, Edgefield, Saluda, Newberry, Lexington, Aiken and Barnwell — have dipped back into severe drought, while the rest

See DROUGHT, Page 5B

of the Upstate has been upgraded to moderate drought status, according to the committee.

The last time this many counties were in severe drought was in 2008-2009, said Hope Mizzell, state climatologist.

"What was a bad situation really has taken a turn for the worse, and conditions have deteriorated pretty rapidly," said Dennis Chastain, the Upstate's drought committee representative.

Conservation pools in the Savannah River lakes have fallen, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wants to reduce flow even further to save what's left. Rather than refilling during the winter months, Upstate lakes like Hartwell and Jocassee have continued to lose water downstream.

Hartwell stood more than 15 feet below full pool at 644.93 feet above sea level Tuesday, according to the corps. Jocassee has reached almost 21 feet below full pool and at 76 feet high, is inching closer to its federally mandated minimum allowable level of 70 feet, according to Duke Energy.

"Most locations that were upgraded to severe drought have received less than 50 percent of normal rainfall over the last 60 days resulting in deteriorating hydrologic conditions," Mizzell said.

In Greenville, 0.9 inch of rain was recorded in November, well below the 3.7 inches that normally falls, according to the National Weather Service. That trend has continued into December, with 0.29 inch of rainfall recorded so far, 1.12 inches shy of normal to date.

Year-to-date, the Greenville area has received 33.34 inches of rain. That's 11.15 inches below normal, according to the weather service.

This year's rainfall has painted a bleak picture of what could await in the spring and summer. With vegetation dormant, most rainfall will find its way into the groundwater system during the winter months. With low rain last winter, the system was never recharged. So far this winter, the system is still losing water, Chastain said.

"I don't ever recall being in these dire straits this time of year," Chastain said.

"This is the kind of situation we're normally looking at in July and August when people's lawns are drying up and it's just absolutely quit raining. And here we are in December with these reservoirs right on down the chain at alarmingly low levels."

The corps has already reduced flow down the Savannah River from Lake Hartwell after the lake reached the third of four drought triggers in November.

Now it may seek another temporary reduction, from 3,100 cubic feet per second to 2,800, for several weeks, in what Stan Simpson, a corps spokesman, called a "deviation from our drought management plan."

The dry winter forecast has heightened concerns from Upstate water managers who reported to the drought committee, Chastain said. Some are concerned about drinking water supply next summer if conditions don't improve, he said.

"It's similar to the condition of '08-'09," Chastain said. "When you start seeing these conditions in winter, you have to wonder, what's the spring and summer going to be?"

■ Contact reporter Nathaniel Cary at 864-298-4272, connect on Facebook or follow @nathanielcary on Twitter.