Drought's end no reason to waste water, officials say

Recent rain fills lake but can't erase memory of decade-long dry spell

By Anna Simon
CLEMSON BUREAU
asimon@greenvillenews.com

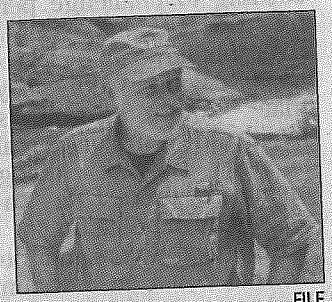
Rain has brought a three-year drought that parched South Carolina lawns and lakes since 2006 to an end, state Climatologist Hope Mizzell said Wednesday.

Signs of recovery abound through the Upstate: Lakes are up; farmers are busy baling hay, and homeowners are reeling out hoses to water landscaping less often than in recent summers.

Seeing what he calls a "wet weather spring" of water pop up recently in his garden at his home north of Pickens was a momentous sign for Dennis Chastain, a member of the state drought committee that voted Wednesday to officially declare the drought at an end for all of South Carolina.

"I haven't seen that in 10 years. That's about as clear an indication as you can get," Chastain said.

There's still some residual impact. Lakes aren't yet at full pool. Groundwater is normal — barely.



FILE

Dennis Chastain

While putting an official end to this drought is cause for celebration, Upstate residents are asked to continue to voluntarily conserve water this summer. "If we learned anything from 10 years of drought, it's that no one in the Upstate of South Carolina should be wasting water," Chastain said.

Mizzell looks at the big picture. August of 1998 started a decade of drought that, with the exception of 2003, 2005 and 2006, has impacted some part of the state. While all areas of the state experienced drought conditions, different regions were hit the hardest in different years. However, every area of the state was affected.

"We learned that we can run out of water," Mizzell said.

"After dealing with it for 10 years, I think everyone has a new attitude and a new understanding of our vulnerability regarding drought," Mizzell said. "I think people are more aware of the limited resource and that we don't always have the rainfall we need when and where we need it."

State Department of Natural Resources hydrologist Masaaki Kiuchi said the Savannah River Basin lakes in the Upstate are "slightly below normal" and are the only lakes in the state that remain below normal.

At 657.6 feet above mean sea level Wednesday, Lake Hartwell was 2.4 feet below full pool, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers data. Duke Energy lakes Keowee and Jocassee were 4.9 feet and 2.4 feet below full pool, respectively, according to Duke's Web site.

Upstate wells show improvement and water levels are rising in most monitoring wells, however, groundwater levels in some areas of the Upstate may not be sufficient to adequately support stream flow if rainfall declines, Kiuchi said.

"Every region of the state has been impacted by this drought," said Ken Rentiers, chairman of the Drought Response Committee. "The return to a normal rainfall pattern brings welcome relief."

So far this year, reporting stations at Long Creek in Oconee County, and in Anderson have recorded greater-than-normal precipitation, and the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport has recorded nearly normal precipitation, according to the state climatologist's office.

Long Creek has gotten 34.07 inches of rain, which is 115 percent of normal. Anderson had 25.28 inches, also 115 percent of normal. Greenville-Spartanburg has received 23.08 inches, which is 99 percent of normal.