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Grab those hoses; 3-year drought officially over

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COLUMBIA (AP) — State officials have confirmed what ponds and lawns across the state have already shown — the nearly three-year drought that gripped the state, dried up wells and sent lakes to record lows is over.

Bountiful winter and spring rains brought streams and lakes back to normal levels across all of South Carolina — except the western part of the state, which is slightly below normal, said state climatologist Hope Mizzell.

The state Drought Response Committee removed 19 northern counties from any stage of drought Wednesday, marking the first time since August 2006 that any part of South Carolina wasn't abnormally dry.

Officials in neighboring Georgia also announced Wednesday their drought ended and lifted tough outdoor water restrictions.

But the good news comes with a caveat. "There is still a tremendous amount of uncertainly about the summer forecast," Mizzell said. "All we need is a dry summer and we could be back in drought."

Drought has become almost normal in South Carolina over the past decade. Some part of the state has been in drought conditions for more than seven of the past 10 years.

The past three years of drought were especially intense in the northwest corner of the state, where some mandatory water restrictions were issued as the dry spell reached its peak last summer.

The above-normal rains started this winter and continued through June, coming at a good time to recharge lakes, rivers and groundwater, Mizzell said.

Farmers have also reported a good season for crops, although a prolonged summer dry spell would still hurt.

Mizzell and others hope the drought has taught South Carolinians the value of water.

"If we have learned anything over the past several years of dealing with drought," said Dennis Chastain, a member of the drought committee. "It is that no one should waste water."