

JOE RAEDLE, GETTY IMAGES

A water on road sign is seen next to a flooded road in Givhans, S.C., on Thursday.

HISTORIC RAINS VIRTUALLY ERASE DROUGHT IN S.C.

Last month, state so dry that most of it was designated "primary natural disaster areas"

John Bacon
USA TODAY

The deadly flooding that swamped much of South Carolina this past week wiped out a drought so serious that last month most of the state was declared a disaster area because of dry conditions.

On Sept. 29, the federal Drought Mitigation Center designated nearly three-quarters of South Carolina as abnormally dry or facing drought conditions. One week later, less than 5% of the state drew the same designation, according to data released Thursday by the agency.

"We were in a pretty serious drought," Leonard Vaughan, a National Weather Service hydrologist in South Carolina told USA TODAY on Thursday. "Our state drought committee will meet ... and basically there will be no drought."

Just weeks ago, the U.S. Agriculture Department had designated most of the state's 46 counties as "primary natural disaster areas" because of damages and losses caused by drought.

"Our hearts go out to those South Carolina farmers and ranchers affected by recent natural disasters," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Sept. 30.

A low pressure system that stalled over the state, fueled by the edge of Hurricane Joaquin, drenched South Carolina in up to 2 feet of rain beginning Oct. 1. Seventeen people have been confirmed dead, and others remain missing.

This week, FEMA issued flood disaster declarations for 15 of South Carolina's 46 counties, including some on USDA's drought disaster list. More counties are expected to qualify for flood relief as damage assessment continues.

The state has experienced chronic problems with drought in the past, dealing with it in eight of the last 10 years, according to the USDA. Vaughn blamed the phenomenon in part on the La Niña weather pattern that can bring dry winters to the Southeast.

The massive influx of rain in the past week doesn't protect the state from another drought next year, Vaughan said.

"We are forecasting normal to above-normal rainfall this winter," Vaughan said. "But beyond that we don't really know what to expect."

"We were in a pretty serious drought. Our state drought committee will meet ... and basically there will be no drought."

Leonard Vaughan, a National Weather Service hydrologist

Although the rain has stopped and the sun is shining, more flooding remains possible as the wall of water swelling the state's rivers rushes toward the coast. Voluntary evacuations were encouraged Thursday for some communities in Georgetown County.

Vaughan said parts of Berkeley, Dorchester, Charleston and Williamsburg counties were among other areas that could see flooding and require evacuations in coming days.

"Some rivers haven't crested yet, and some will remain above flood levels into next week," Vaughan said. "The situation is definitely improving, but this isn't over yet."