More rainfall needed to make dent in drought

THE JOURNAL STAFF

SENECA — Even with the recent rainfall, Oconee is still in a severe drought, according to officials.

After meeting at the South Carolina Forestry Commission Thursday morning, the South Carolina Drought Response Committee changed the drought statuses for 11 counties in the state.

All counties in the southern portion of the state have been upgraded from normal to incipient, the first level of drought. The coastal counties in the Lower Savannah River Basin of the state have also been upgraded to incipient, and Barnwell County has been moved to moderate status.

"It's hard to believe that, in early October, many of these counties received more than 10 inches of rain," South Carolina Department of Natural Resources state climatologist Hope Mizzell said. "But with no rain since then, they've now slipped into a drought."

All other counties maintained their current drought levels. There was not overwhelming support for an upgrade in these counties due to recent rains and more rain in the forecast.

The severe drought in the Upstate has played a big role in the Pinnacle Mountain Fire and, according to the South Carolina Forestry Commission, the benefits from this week's rain may only be temporary.

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"Long-range predictions continue to show above-normal wildfire potential through the month of December," SCFC fire duty officer Doug Mills said. "The concern for wildfires will be exasperated by leaf fall occurring on top of already-dry fuels, creating yet another layer of fuel in the short term. Normal winter conditions are expected to prevail in January and February with occasional periods of increased fire activity."

The Pinnacle Mountain Fire has grown to 10,560 acres, the third largest in state history. The current expense of the fire is an estimated $4.57 million.

While the Upstate battles the mountain blaze, farmers statewide are facing issues with their crops and livestock. The South Carolina Department of Agriculture is encouraging farmers to use the hay exchange on its website or in the Market Bulletin as yields across the board are mixed due to both the drought and the effects of Hurricane Matthew.

"There's not much forage for grazing and farmers have not been able to plant for winter grazing," SCDA assistant commissioner Aaron Wood said. "While drier conditions have allowed row crop harvest to progress ahead of schedule, annual small grain planting and forage stockpiling are well below normal due to a lack of soil moisture.

"From an agricultural perspective, the drought is becoming more severe, respectively, across the state. But since we're at the end of the growing season, we're hoping that the rain forecasted over the next 14 days materializes."

According to SCDNR hydrologist Scott Harder, stream flow levels in much of the Upstate have remained well below normal and reservoir levels continue to decline.

Some members of the committee have lived in South Carolina for decades and say they have never seen a drought of this magnitude.

"I wish we had a drought designation that was called profound because this is one of the most profound droughts I've ever experienced," committee member Dennis Chastain said.

The National Weather Service in Columbia also continues to monitor the weather conditions and is hoping more rain will fall into the forecast.

"Even though we've had some recent widespread rainfall across the state, it's not enough to improve the drought conditions that currently exist," Leonard Vaughan said. "Even rain that is forecast in the near future would not be significant enough to make a big change. We need more frequent rainfall events to make a big dent in the current drought."

Committee chairman Ken Rentiers said more changes will be made as necessary.

