Panel: Upstate counties in moderate drought

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The hot, dry spell of recent weeks came on so quickly and with such ferocity that the state Drought Response Committee voted Friday to move Pickens, Anderson, Oconee and Abbeville counties directly from no-drought status to moderate drought, the second level of seriousness.

"Ill be honest with you, I don't think I have ever seen a drought cycle develop and deteriorate as quickly as this has," committee member Dennis Chastain of Pickens said. "It's honestly like we have a big plastic bubble over us."

Greenville, Spartanburg and Laurens counties and most of the rest of the state except the northeastern section was declared to be in incipient drought.

Going directly to moderate drought from no drought is rare, according to Hope Mizzell, state climatologist. She had expected the region to be declared incipient drought.

"As you know, we typically hate to jump two levels of drought," she told committee members on a conference call after Chastain recommended putting the northwest corner of the state in moderate drought status.

"Folks who live in this area, if we declare it incipient, they're going to say, 'have you been here, have you looked around?'" Chastain said.

So far water levels in rivers and reservoirs are not down precipitously, although the Saluda River stream flow is classified as in moderate drought conditions and the Chattooga River, on the border of Oconee County and Georgia, is in severe drought, a Department of Natural Resources official on the conference call said.

The state was fortunate in starting the spring with above normal levels of groundwater after last fall's rains, he said.

But crops are suffering in much of the state, agricultural officials said.

"A lot of watermelons are starting to head south," said Brad Boozer, manager of the State Farmers Market.

Corn is not pollinating, soybeans and other row crops are suffering and cattle farmers have started feeding hay because their pastures have dried up, he said.

"It's not looking good," Boozer said.

Some areas have had scattered thundershowers — the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport has had about normal rainfall totals since the start of June because of brief storms — but the Anderson Airport went 32 days without any rain, its fourth-driest spell on record, officials said.



KEN RUINARD/ANDERSON INDEPENDENT-MAIL
Soybeans in a field off of Norris Road in Anderson are not as big due to dry weather.

Even the storms aren't very wet.

"You're hearing about these thunderstorms, with wind and lightning and downed trees, but there's very little rainfall," Mizzell said.

Chastain said he fears the worst is yet to come.

The hot, dry, windy weather that has gripped the Upstate since the start of June came without the development of any El Nino or La Nina pattern, which are generally the culprits in driving moisture away from the Southeast, he said.

And the National Drought Mitigation Center is predicting a 75 percent probability that a La Nina pattern will develop later this summer or early fall.

"That is seriously bad news," Chastain said.

Declaring a moderate drought status requires the DNR to step up monitoring of deep water wells, stream flows and other drought indices. Incipient is a recognition that an area is in an abnormally dry period and the future is uncertain.

Chastain expressed concern over the increased potential for wildfires started by campfires. A forestry official at the drought committee meeting said measurements of moisture from the upper levels of the soil up to the understory were extremely low in the mountains.

"Folks ought to use caution, and really, with the high temperatures we're having, people ought to second think whether they need a campfire at all," Chastain said.

Mizzell said the committee likely will meet again in three to four weeks.