Parts of state now drought-free

Panel says Upstate lakes still need a lot of rain

By Susanne M. Schafer
The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — South Carolina's drought committee declared 14 counties in the northeast and along the coast free from drought on Thursday, mainly in areas that have benefited from higher-than-normal rainfall over the past two months.

The decision marks the first time since February 2011 that portions of the state could be declared in a normal, or drought-free status, state Climatologist Hope Mizell said.

Lake levels in the western portion of the state including the Upstate and the Savannah River Basin still need significant rainfall to bounce back, some panel members said during a statewide teleconference. And the upcoming storm season doesn't look promising, they added.

"We're getting into the time of year that is usually the driest," Mizell told the South Carolina Drought Response Committee meeting.

Some portion of the state has suffered unusually dry weather during the past decade, and regions in the Southeast have been in a severe drought since 2010.

But the recent rains alleviated drought conditions, leading the panel to downgrade the drought status for many of the state's 46 counties.

Rains in Kingstree, Bluffton, and Mount Pleasant, for example, exceeded 16 inches over a 60-day period, or 150 percent of normal for the period, Mizell said.

The panel moved five counties along the Savannah River out of the severe drought category, those being Abbeville, McCormick, Edgefield, Aiken and Barnwell.

The committee decided to maintain some kind of drought status in counties where evidence from climate indicators had not shown that that conditions in those areas had significantly improved, Mizell said.

Those counties were in a north-to-south slice stretching across the central portion of the state from Greenville to Colleton.

In all, the panel approved placing 14 counties in a normal status, 20 in the next level called incipient drought, and 12 counties in the moderate drought level.

Marion Rizer, the soil and water conservation district commissioner in Colleton County, said the summer rainfall "was enough to produce the best corn crop I've ever harvested since I started farming in 1975."

But in recent weeks, he added, he's had no rain at all.

One bright light was noted by Darryl Jones of the Forestry Commission, who said the state had recorded a near record low number of fires in the past two months.

The rains have kept woodlands and other areas fairly green, but since fall is a dry time, officials are expecting an increase in fire activity, he said.