Rain could further loosen DROUGHT'S GRIP



Lake Hartwell is recovering from the low water levels it was at last fall. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

Storms this week could put "major dent" in drought

By Nathaniel Cary
Staff Writer
ncary@greenvillenews.com

Rain, rain, go away may be what the children say as summer vacation kicks into gear, but rainfall this week might help rescue the Upstate from a lingering drought that has fluctuated between severe and moderate for much of the region.

While four counties statewide remain under severe drought conditions and bone-dry water tables have yet to refill to normal levels, regular soaking rains over the past month have assuaged the worst concerns of the state's drought response committee and offer a brighter summer outlook.

"We have really just been dumped on pretty much across the state," said Dennis Chastain, the Savannah Basin's representative on the South Carolina Drought Response Committee. "It really honestly is as close to what we think of as normal in several years."

The committee saw enough evidence in rainfall amounts to downgrade Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties from severe to moderate drought status this week, bringing those counties in line with Greenville as well as Laurens, Saluda and Newberry.

Umbrellas and rain boots will be a familiar sight early this week, too, as a rainy pattern that started Saturday night is expected to continue through at least Tuesday night, according to National Weather Service.

"During the day on Monday we could have anywhere from a half-inch to maybe an inch," said meteorologist Doug Outlaw. "Some places could even get more depending on if some places have a thunderstorm."

And these rains, the light, soaking variety, are needed to break through the hard crust and fill the rivers and reservoirs left barren by three to six months of pronounced dry conditions.

Outlaw predicted up to two inches could fall in most areas by Tuesday night with some receiving three inches or more if hit by successive thunderstorms.

Thunderstorms aren't expected to be severe but could bring the heaviest rain this evening, Outlaw said.

Tuesday will bring more showers, and thunderstorms could strike, though not as widespread as tonight, he said.

Things have improved on the drought front over the past week, Outlaw said.

"This event is going to put

See DROUGHT, Page 11A

DROUGHT

Continued from Page 1A

a major dent in the drought situation," he said.

However, four counties, Abbeville, McCormick, Edgefield and Aiken, remain at the critical severe drought status, according to the drought response committee. Those counties are all in the Savannah River Basin, where rains that have fallen have gone to replenish low groundwater levels while rivers and lakes remain low, Hope Mizzell, state climatologist, said last week.

Lake Hartwell sits eight feet below normal while farther downstream Lake Russell is four feet low and Lake Thurmond is also eight feet low, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Lake Jocassee is nearly 23 feet below normal, according to Duke Energy.

Chastain said the lake levels are still very concerning because lakes were never recharged with winter and spring rains. The Corps has reduced flow from its reservoirs but with hot summer months here and evaporation rates rising with the temperature, more rain is needed to maintain the water levels, he said.

Only five rivers across the state have flows higher than 50 percent of average in the latest test, said Scott Harder, state Department of Natural Resources Hydrologist, though most stream flows are increasing.

A continued string of showers every three to five days should keep the Upstate on track through the summer, but with an uncertain forecast as the region transitions from a La Nina weather pattern to an eventual El Nino, only the remnants of a tropical storm or hurricane would fill the basins once again, Chastain said.

But for now, with more rain on the way this week, "we can kind of breathe a sigh of relief in the Upstate here for the short term," Chastain said.