

## Rain deficit has farmers worried in Upstate

By Jennifer Crossley Howard

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ANDERSON — Anderson received more than two inches of rain last week, but area cattle, crops and irrigation ponds need more than that to thrive as temperatures rise.

April rainfall totaled 2.71 inches, according to National Weather Service meteorologist Pat Tanner. That is more than half an inch lower than normal.

May's rain outlook is not much better, Tanner said. Highs will reach the mid to high 80s and drop overnight into the 60s, but there is no chance of rain through Saturday night. Saturday's high is forecast to reach 91 degrees.

Conditions were so dry in Anderson, Oconee and Pickens, Abbeville, Edgefield and McCormick counties that the state Drought Response Committee voted last week to keep their drought status at "severe," the third-most-serious level. The committee also added Aiken County to the severe-drought list.

David Tompkins, manager of the state's farmers markets, said he is concerned about grass and hay crops because livestock rely on them.

But things have been a little wetter on a cattle farm in Oconee County.

"We've taken pretty good care of our grass and we've had pretty good rainfall here," farmer Leland Gibson said.

The grass is green at Gibson Farms in Westminster, but he said other farmers in the area are struggling against the heat.

Rainfall can vary dramatically within a few miles. Gibson operates another farm four miles from his main farm, and last summer it scorched while the other farm received plenty of rain.

If rainfall slows, he's ready.

He has stockpiled 60 bales of hay in the barn and another 40 on the ground. He's cutting another batch next week.

"That'll be more hay than we fed the entire year last year," Gibson said. "I'm organic so if my grass doesn't grow I really can't get hay from anyone else."

If conditions worsen on his main farm, he can always move cattle to his second farm, where the grass grows as tall as corn stalks.

"It's about 6 feet tall," Gibson said.

Wheat and cotton, two crops planted recently, need more rain after they are put in the ground, Tompkins said, and irrigation ponds are low.

"It's got people very concerned," he said. "A lot of our crops are just subject to rainfall and what naturally comes, and there's not much you can do but wait for rain to come."

If conditions don't improve in about a month, municipalities could restrict customers from washing their cars or watering their lawns, the Drought Response Committee concluded last week.

"A lot of that is geared toward keeping industries operating and making sure water goes where it's most needed," Tompkins said.

Still, conditions have not grown that serious yet.

Brief spring showers are good, but a tropical storm system is what Anderson will need to catch up on rain, he said.

"We need something that soaks us for several days," Tompkins said.

Hartwell Lake has fluctuated between 651 feet and 653 since January, and this week it stood 652.42 feet. Lake Jocassee stood 24 feet below full pool, and Lake Keowee stood 4 feet below full pool.

In August, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reduced the outflow at the Lake Thurmond Dam, where official releases are measured. Outflows went from 4,000 cubic feet per second down to 3,800 cubic feet per second in October, said corps spokesman Billy Birdwell, and they remain unchanged.

