Rain shortfall clouds water outlook

Drought prospect looms as forecast calls for another dry winter

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The rain that brushed the Upstate this week won't be enough to avert what could be another drought year in the region, perhaps rivaling 2008, according to some.

That was the word from the state Drought Response Committee, which met Tuesday to consider changing the drought status of 37 Palmetto State counties from incipient to moderate.

The committee met based on forecasts for a dry winter, but voted to delay making changes until January, when it can meet again if the predictions hold true.

"We have four stages of drought, so we don't want to just all of a sudden start talking to the public when we're in 'extreme,'" said Hope Mizzell, state climatologist. "You have a progression of communication, a progression of actions, as they're needed."

Mizzell said "water systems, industries and state agencies are working together to closely monitor our water supply, looking at our current condition, as well as future forecasts."

For now, the forecast is less than encouraging. A La Nina weather system has contributed to below-average rainfall this fall, Mizzell said, putting the state in a deficit heading into the winter months, which are critical for "recharging" the state's water level.

The La Nina system could linger into spring 2011, which means the state could come up even shorter.

As of Tuesday, the rainfall for this time of year was 7.09 inches below average of 45.54 inches at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, according to Bob Bruce, meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Greer.

The drought committee opted to take no action until January because upgrading from "incipient" to "moderate" would trigger mainly water-use restrictions, which have little value this time of year.

"Water usage is at the lowest level of the year," said Dennis Chastain, an Upstate naturalist and committee member. "We couldn't accomplish much by reducing water usage now."

While Chastain said the committee was right to adopt a wait-and-see approach until January, he said he's also concerned the Upstate should hold onto the water it has in area lakes such as Jocassee and Hartwell.

"The thing that really concerns all of us who represent the Upstate of South Carolina is that we're entering what appears to be a prolonged drought with our reservoirs being at uncomfortable levels," Chastain said.

"It just breaks my heart to know that we are entering a prolonged drought cycle, and yet we are send-

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