Rain showers may ease dry spell

Several inches could fall today and Tuesday in mountains

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Raindrops started to fall over some parts of the Upstate Sunday night. By late tonight, much of the Upstate could be bathed in showers, a welcome sign for a region that's fallen nearly six feet below normal rain accumulation this year.

Lakes have seeped lower and hikers feet trudge through dry, crunchy woods in signs that both the region's water table and its water reservoirs are feeling the effects of the summer-long drought.

Several inches of rain this week could break the spell and start the Upstate on a path to recovery.

It all depends on where and how much rain falls, said Dennis Chastain, a member of the state's drought response committee who's kept a close eye on storms expected to stretch out across the Upstate through the early half of this week.

"We desperately need the rain," Chastain said. "The storm track is going to be critical in terms of how much we get. It could be a little bit or it could be a lot, as much as four inches."

Storms could lean toward either side of the state line with North Carolina, right about where Lake Jocassee sits with its water level currently 23 feet below full pool, according to Duke Energy.

Either way could make a huge difference, Chastain said.

"This could be either a real good infusion of rain, or if we don't get more than a half-inch to an inch, the drought continues," he said.

As much as three inches could fall in the mountains north of Greenville as storms move in from the west today and stay in the region through Tuesday, said Doug Outlaw, meteorologist with the National Weather Service

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station in Greer.

The Greenville area could see one to one-and-a-half inches with the heaviest rainfall pegged for late tonight into early Tuesday, Outlaw said.

Showers and thunderstorms will be scattered before 10 a.m. today and will increase through the day. After 8 p.m. there is a 100 percent chance of showers or thunderstorms, according to the weather service.

Showers and thunderstorms will continue Tuesday and will taper off by Tuesday night, according to the weather service.

"It's going to be kind of a long event," Outlaw said Sunday. "We've had some rain already in the mountains today."

A sustained storm could help break apart the high pressure dome that's formed above the region and has deflected tropical moisture away from the southeast so far this summer, Chastain said.

"I'm hoping that this front that's coming through is going to kind of break things loose, get rid of this high pressure dome that's left us high and dry and hopefully start a new fall pattern of three or four inches of rain a month," Chastain said.

This year, Greenville has received 28.38 inches of rain, 5.89 inches below normal, according to the weather service. This month, Greenville has seen 1.32 inches, nearly a half-inch short.

With the region in transition toward an El Nino rainy period likely to arrive in November and December, a wet fall and winter could do wonders for the water table and reservoirs, Chastain said.

A wet winter still wouldn't completely recharge reservoirs like Lake Hartwell, he said.

Lake Hartwell sits 12 feet below full pool now and is projected to sink 15 feet low by Nov. 1, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates.



In wetter times, this sign served to warn users of Lake Hartwell. The lake sits 12 feet below full pool now and is projected to sink 15 feet low by Nov. 1, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates. NATHANIEL CARY/STAFF

A recent move by the Corps may save more of the water that's left in the lake from being sent downstream by allowing the Corps to slice how much water is released during winter months and when the lake hits certain drought triggers.

Changes were put in place after the Corps completed an environmental assessment of the entire basin, a lengthy summer-long process.

The Corps can also use stream flow as an indicator of current conditions along with lake levels, which may allow it to make outflow changes sooner and will allow the Corps to improve water storage in lakes during droughts, Corps commander Maj. Jeff Hall said in an August press release.

Anything that gives the Corps, a federal agency, more flexibility to assess conditions should help, Chastain said.

"Anything that gives them more flexibility to base their decision on how much water to retain and how much to send downstream based on real-time conditions, that's a good thing," he said.