Stubborn drought will stick

Recent storms not enough to change status

ABIGAIL MARGULIS
AMARGULIS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

Despite recent showers and storms during much of December, Western North Carolina and much of the South's severe drought still lingers and meteorologists say there won't be any relief soon.

A large portion of the state remains in some category of drought with most western counties considered to be in a severe or extreme drought, according to the N.C. Drought Monitor.

The center's weekly monitor, released Thursday, describes some improvement due to recent rains, but its map shows the central and western part of the state stubbornly covered in oranges, reds and browns, which is bad news for the region.

Recent rainfall – nearly 2 inches for the first three weeks of December and 1.54 inches at the end of November - has certainly helped with the severity of drought conditions, but "it's taken months to get to where we are now, and unfortunately, it's going to take more than a couple of precipitation events to get us out of this drought," said Rebecca Ward, a state climatologist.

Drought first emerged in March and intensified through the spring, summer and fall. Most of the region received half the usual rainfall during the past six months, according to data from the National Weather Service.

The Asheville Regional Airport had observed 33.03 inches of rain from Jan. 1 to Dec. 17, which is about 11 inches below normal.

Combined with a lack of rainfall, summer and fall temperatures soared above average in Asheville.

Scientist recorded June, July and August as the city's hottest summer on record, with data going back to 1902, according to Jake Crouch, an Asheville National Centers for Environmental Information climate scientist.

The average temperature during those three months reached 75.7 degrees, Crouch said. "That surpassed the average from 1981 through 2010 by 3.3 degrees."

Although, Asheville's weather station at the Asheville Regional Airport recorded a higher average summer temperature of 77.3 degrees, he said.

Monthly average temperatures recorded at the Asheville Regional Airport have not been below normal since prior to Feb. 16, according to data from the Raleigh-based state Climate Office of North Carolina.

From Jan. 16 through Feb. 16, the average daily temperature was 34.2 degrees Fahrenheit, or 1.6 degrees below normal.

Since then, through Nov. 30, the departure from the average norm has ranged from .2 degrees to 6.8 degrees hotter.

Drought impacts

Due to the worsening drought over the past six months, farmers and firefighters in the region have seen several impacts from bare pastures to a historic wildfire season.

Several area farmers have reported a lack of grass due to dry conditions causing animals to be fed hay sooner than expected, which adds to farm costs.

Farmers have also had to reduce herd numbers in hopes of having enough hay to get them through the winter, according to a November state weather and crops report.

Dozens of wildfires burned more than 70,000 acres across the region in the Nantahala National Forest starting in late October, in Chimney Rock State Park near Lake Lure, and in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, fueled by extreme drought conditions.

But side effects of the drought didn't stop with agriculture and fires.

"We've received reports that leaf colors were muted in some places during the fall, and multiple public water supply systems throughout the mountains and western Piedmont have entered voluntary or mandatory water use restrictions due to the drought," Ward said.

Weather outlook

"For conditions to really start improving, we'd need to see more of the slow, 'soaking' precipitation events, like what we've recently experienced, throughout winter," Ward said.

Typically, winter is a time for water in surface reservoirs, soil moisture, groundwater, and streams and rivers to recharge since there's not as much of demand for water across the state, she said.

A climatologist in Alabama says the region needs an additional 10 inches in the next few weeks, but too much, too fast also won't help.

With some of the recent thunderstorms, "quite a bit of it was heavy so there was a tremendous amount of runoff," said John Christie, Alabama's state climatologist. "It just came too fast to soak in."

However, the NOAA weather outlook is calling for below normal precipitation combined with above normal temperatures this winter, which is typical of a La Nina weather system.

"There's a very real possibility the drought could stick around for months to come," Ward said. "Even if we did see a return to more normal, or even above-normal, precipitation, it's important to remember that drought is more than just dry weather ..."

around