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FILE PHOTO

: wasn't that long ago that the safety buoy in the lower eft corner of this photo was several feet above the water ne (see inset). One of the rainiest winters on record has taken Lake Hartwell beyond full pond, with little relief available downstream.

Too much of a good thing?

Drought long forgotten in saturated South Carolina

BY ANDREW MOORE
THE JOURNAL

Oconee County followed up the wettest fall in its history with a historically soaked winter, and those rains are inching Oconee and Pickens, along with the entire state, out of a long-term drought.

State Climatologist Hope Mizzell confirmed this week that not only was every single county in South Carolina out of the drought that once encompassed the state, but groundwater levels indicate the long-term drought that has plagued the state for 10 years may also become part of our history.

"We're showing signs that we're approaching a complete recovery, but again, we say that with hesitation," Mizzell said. "Groundwater recharges more slowly."

Experts are expected to get a full reckoning of how well the once parched earth in the western upstate has recovered in the spring, Mizzell added.

The climatological winter, beginning Dec. 1, has been a good one in terms of rain. Walhalla has seen more than 21 inches of rain, the fifth wettest since 1896, and the wettest winter in nearly 40 years after what Mizzell called an "extreme" pattern of precipitation the last three months.

"Everything looks positive, it looks like its recharging, but it's still too early to say for sure," she said. "We'll see how February goes and put it in perspective."

She also said there is always an increased risk of rural and even urban flooding, as well as costly construction delays.

Seneca Utilities Director Bob Faires has indicated that the Duke sewer line project's completion in 2010 will be predicated upon how the weather cooperates.

While groundwater levels are still in doubt in the long term, water levels in local lakes continue to swell.

Billy Birdwell of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers confirmed that Lake Hartwell is more than 662 feet above mean sea level, nearly six feet above the average level this time of year and only three feet below the highest the lake has ever been. Those levels also mean the Corps is releasing water downstream at a frenetic pace.

"We are discharging water at a much higher rate than normal. We work

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wet," he said, referencing a slide that took place on Old Clemson Highway last week. "High winds push over trees, which loosens the soil further, causing a bigger problem than just a downed tree. In addition, tree limbs are prone to fall, so people driving and walking in neighborhoods need to be aware of their above-the-head surroundings."

When it comes to gardening and landscaping, cold weather and rain have kept growers out of the garden and that's putting a pinch on nurseries.

Lance Yuda, owner of Zone 7 in Seneca, said the immediate impact is negative, but long term, it could be a record year for sales.

"Now the cold rain is keeping things quiet," he said. "But gardeners are thrilled at the idea of not having to water their plants constantly to keep them alive in drought conditions. On the negative, lots of rain will drain the nutrients in soil, impacting spring growth."

According to Howard Hiller, of Clemson University Extension, these conditions — cold weather and rain — provide an ideal start for fruit growers. But too much rain can be detrimental to other farmers.

"Our soil can be damaged if it is worked too wet," Hiller said. "Growers know this and will do their best to wait until the soil is dry enough to till."

Hiller is also concerned about run-off.

"When we have a rain now, we almost immediately get runoff," he said. "This is causing some erosion problems, particularly on bare land and steep slopes.



JESSICA SIBLEY/STAFF

While the wet weater — combined with the cold — has kept gardeners mostly indoors, crews at Zone 7 in Seneca are making sales for upcoming planting potential. Here, Tracy Smith loads some azaleas into a customer's truck.

Oconee County has eight flood control lakes in the Beaverdam and Conerross watershed areas to prevent uncontrolled erosion and flooding, which is helpful, certainly."

According to Ben Turetzky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, septic problems are sure to follow all the rain.

"Heavy rains make it difficult for drainage fields adjacent to septic tanks to work properly," Turetzky said. "During previous heavy rains, there was a soapy foam in Sertoma Park (in Walhalla). Whether it came from the sewer system or septic systems, those are the only two options for that substance to be found. Either way, it's not good."

When it comes to animal waste run-off, Hiller said he doesn't see much of an issue.

"Livestock producers who follow setback recommendations from streams, currently 100 feet, when applying litter to pastures and hayfields should have minimal impact on animal waste moving into streams," Hiller added.

Then, there is the impact of all this rain on the average homeowner.

"Rain will push ants inside while moisture will attract termites," said Eric Benson, entomologist from Clemson Extension. "The best solution is to be preventative. Keep an eye out for warning signs like wet mulch around the house and standing water. If the area around the house has been wet for some time, call for a quick termite inspection. Catching an issue before it becomes an issue will save lots of money and time."

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