

HEIDI HEILBRUNN / STAFF

Asa Beaty, 7, practices casting a line Thursday into Clemson's Larry Abernathy Waterfront Park, which has gone dry as drought continues in the Upstate.

Upstate in drought as coast underwater

Region asked to conserve water

ERIC CONNOR
ECONNOR@GREENVILLENEWS.COM

It's been two weeks since Hurricane Matthew menaced the edge of the Eastern shoreline before settling on the Lowcountry to make its first landfall in the U.S.

Today, the aftermath is almost a tale of two South Carolinas.

The Pee Dee region just inland from where Matthew did its worst is asking not to be forgotten as homes and businesses literally emerge from underwater.

Meanwhile, the Upstate is being asked by the chief water utility to conserve as state drought officials prepare this week to, most likely, upgrade the region's drought status just as the lower part of the state is removed from the list.

The request earlier this month to conserve water seemed "almost preposterous" as Matthew began to take aim at the Southeast, said Olivia Vassey, communications director for the Greenville Water System.

The plea to limit nonessential use of water for irrigating lawns and washing cars still stands.

"It's difficult to convince people to conserve water when a significant portion of South Carolina remains underwater from a hurricane," Vassey said.

The status could be changed from "voluntary" to "mandatory" if drought conditions deteriorate and require limits on the drinking water drawn from

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Lake Keowee, she said.

The tell-tale sign of a drought in the Upstate — lake levels — is clear. Lake Hartwell is 7 feet below normal, prompting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to restrict water released through the Lake Hartwell dam for electricity. Lake Jocassee is 10 feet below full level, Keowee 4 feet.

Weather forecasters offer little encouragement. The National Climate Prediction Center's latest forecast issued last week expects a warmer and drier than normal winter in the South.

Yet there is one bright spot: The warm and dry weather could result in one the Upstate's more-colorful autumn leaf seasons over the next few weeks.

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The wake of Hurricane Matthew — which killed more than 1,300 in the Atlantic, four of them in South Carolina — marks the second October in a row that a major storm pattern has caused epic flooding in South Carolina and wiped out a drought.

Last October, a weather event associated with Hurricane Joaquin dropped 2 feet of rain in some areas.

That storm event — which ultimately killed 19 in South Carolina — spread to the Upstate, resulting in rain totals exceeding 7 inches in Greenville County.

But the last time the state was left so starkly divided after a major storm dates back to September 1999 and another hurricane that brought extensive flooding to the Carolinas — Hurricane Floyd, said Hope Mizzell, State Climatologist for the state Department of Natural Resources.

Floyd ended drought conditions in the Lowcountry, but the rain that channeled north up the coast largely bypassed the Upstate.

"This is pretty rare to see these two extremes," Mizzell said.

The path of Matthew — which in some areas along the South Carolina coast dropped more than 15 inches of rain — likewise left the region wanting for rain.

A few areas in the Upstate reported receiving more than an inch of rain from Matthew, but the National Weather Service's final tally from Oct. 7-9 showed most of the region receiving less than inch or a trace.

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Like last October, the state's Drought Response Committee canceled its scheduled meeting to assess drought status as heavy rain was imminent.

The committee is set to meet on Wednesday.

The decision on the lower part of the state will be obvious, but the Upstate will take more inspection to make a determination, Mizzell said.

The western half of the Upstate is currently classified as being in a "moderate" state of drought. The eastern half is in the earliest stage, known as "incipient."

However, the rain has been scarce and the days last week particularly hot, which leads to quicker evaporation.

The high temperatures at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport reached record highs each day Wednesday through Friday, peaking at 89.

The outlook from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's drought monitor shows a drier picture than the state's current assessment.

The U.S. monitor considers the Upstate area to be in a "severe" drought, with a small swath in the southern portion classified as "extreme" drought.

In the assessment, the Upstate joins the outer edge of a general collection of drought severity in the Southeast that is exceeded only by drought conditions in California.

The federal government's drought outlook doesn't show improvement as the Upstate is part of a designation showing a drought persisting through the end of January.

The National Climate Prediction Center cites the effects of a La Nina weather pattern in the eastern Pacific — opposite the better-known rainmaker El Nino — that generally results in drier winter conditions in the South.

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The dry and warm conditions should aid in a colorful display of fall leaves, depending on some other factors that will develop over the next few weeks, said Don Hagan, a Clemson University forest ecology professor.

"A little bit of drought stress is good for fall colors," Hagan said. "If we assume from here on out that we have more-typical fall conditions, that's going to really bring out the color."

If anything, warm conditions have made it so that the peak for colors could be delayed slightly, he said.

Each season is different and depends on a number of different factors

For instance, poplar trees are nearly bare because they aren't drought-resistant and started dropping leaves in August.

"They've cut their losses," Hagan said. "They're just going to try again next year."

However, the Upstate's predominant oaks and maples hold on to their leaves longer but will begin fall color changes earlier, he said.

This makes it so that the season is condensed and trees peak closer together.

Trees further south in the state where more rain fell and temperatures likewise were warm will be less encouraged to drop leaves, which will limit color.

There are still a few variables in the Upstate that will determine how colorful the foliage becomes.



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