Upstate officially out of 'extreme' drought category

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South Carolina's Drought Response Committee came out of its meeting Wednesday morning with good news.

Upstate South Carolina, including Pickens and Oconee counties had significantly improved, being downgraded from "extreme," or the worst category of drought, to "moderate."

That classification completely skips the "severe" stage of drought.

"It's been over a month, nearly two months actually, since we've met," State Climatologist Hope Mizzell said. "Because of that, we've seen very significant improvement since the committee last met."

Ten counties across the Upstate are listed in moderate drought, while nine are "incipient," and the rest of the Midlands and Lowcountry are considered normal.

"With the moisture we've gotten, the lake levels, the stream flow being so improved, some folks were eager to say the drought is over," Mizzell said. "But we've maintained the drought because of groundwater."

West Drought Management Area committee member Dennis Chastain of Pickens urged the public to look at the broader picture given the recent precipitation around the state, saying groundwater levels were still low.

"The public needs to look below the surface and realize we are still in a 10-year drought cycle," Chastain said. "We need substantial improvement in rainfall to recharge groundwater to anything like normal."

While most lakes and streams in the Palmetto State have seen drastic improvement, the western Upstate still sees low lake levels

Department of Natural Resources Hydrologist Masaaki Kiuchi said that while the state's stream flow gauges show no drought, the Savannah River Basin, which includes Lake Hartwell, is still well below normal.

The current status is a far cry from just last August, when 14 counties in the state were in the worst possible class.