

Future of N.C. drought unpredictable

by Kaitlin Ugolik, June 26, 2008

According to climatologists, detecting the future of North Carolina's drought won't be possible until the winter.

"During the winter season we have some ability to forecast with accuracy whether it's going to be a wet or dry winter....We're experiencing the lingering effects of the drought from last year [because] we didn't see the kind of recovery over winter that we would have needed to really get us out of drought conditions," said Ryan Boyles, an N.C. State University professor and climatologist.

Alamance County is currently considered to be experiencing severe drought, level D2, according to the N.C. Drought Management Advisory Council, while the majority of the state is split between moderate, D1, and extreme, D3. Drought levels are based on the impact of the dryness on agriculture and water levels.

Jamie Kritzer, spokesman for the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, said that he didn't know of any towns currently without water, but several communities are in the process of starting "interconnections" to share water.

The interconnected towns currently are Mars Hill and Weaverville, Hendersonville, Saluda, Tryon, Columbus and Tryon Mountain, King and Winston Salem and Boone and Blowing Rock.

According to Boyles, the southwest Piedmont and southwest mountain region are experiencing the lowest stream and groundwater levels and the least amount of rainfall. The Haw River is one of many water bodies across the state experiencing below normal stream flow.

It's not simply a question of how much rain is needed to reverse the effects, Boyles said, but the frequency and nature of the rain.

Twenty inches all at once would have no significant impact, turning mostly to runoff and not soaking into the soil, but the same amount over several weeks would be beneficial. Neither kind of rain, however, is in the forecast.

The dry winter was caused by a La Niña system: cooler-than-normal temperatures in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean.

The oscillation between a La Niña and an El Niño system, warmer-than-normal temperatures in that area, decides seasonal climates around the world.

Because most summer weather is dictated by the location and intensity of the Bermuda High Pressure System and climatologists don't have the same capacity of forecasting this system as they do with El Niños and La Niñas, the summer forecast is hard to predict more than a few days in advance.

"The science just isn't there yet," Boyles said. "Our guidance for the rest of the summer is that it could be wet, it could be dry, it could be normal. We really don't know."

Water Conservation Tips

Compiled from savewaternc.org

According to the N.C. Drought Management Advisory Council, Alamance County is experiencing a drought level of D2, or “severe drought.” Gov. Mike Easley recommends that residents take the following steps to conserve water:

- Place a water-filled plastic bottle in your toilet tank to reduce the amount of water needed to fill it
- Run washing machines and dishwashers only with full loads to maximize efficiency
- Put food coloring in your toilet tank — if it shows up in the bowl before flushing, replace the leaking flap
- Collect water from the bath/shower while waiting for it to heat up and use it to water plants
- Compost food scraps instead of using sink disposals
- Catch rainwater from your gutters with a rain barrel and use it to water your flowers and vegetables and to wash your car
- Set lawn mower blades one notch higher — longer grass means less evaporation
- Turn off the water while brushing your teeth and shaving
- Minimize flushes. Remember: “If it’s yellow, let it mellow...”
- Take baths instead of showers and limit your showers to five minutes
- Don’t rinse dishes before putting them in the dishwasher, or use a pan of water in the sink and re-use it as long as possible

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