

Upstate rivers run dry

Small water systems struggle to keep the faucets flowing

To the north and west of Greenville, the city of Pickens would be out of water if it were not for the happenstance of a Greenville Water System supply line running nearby, officials say.

Gov. Mark Sanford asked the federal government to declare 44 of the state's 46 counties agricultural disaster areas during a tour of Pickens County on Wednesday.

East of the county line, in Spartanburg, the Lyman, Jackson, Wellford, Duncan (SJWD) Water District has about 120 days of water left in their largest reservoir and there is a considerable

row brewing about how that remaining pool of water is allocated.

Lynn Stovall, general manager of the Greenville Water System, says supplies are adequate for customers, but voluntary water conservation measures have been in effect since early this year.

No one should use water carelessly, he said.

All across the Upstate, the epicenter of a decade-long drought that has brought groundwater levels to historic lows, the story is the same. Some small water districts and towns are facing a crisis of supply or soon will be.

In Pickens, there is no outflow from the city

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reservoir and precious little inflow - one stream out of three that supply the lake still has flow. Downstream at the city's water treatment plant the emergency pump station is useless, there's no water in the stream, said Chris Eldridge, Pickens city manager.

"We get about 800,000 gallons a day from that stream in normal drought times," Eldridge said. "These are not normal drought times."

For about three weeks the city has been pulling most of its water from the 72-inch Greenville Water System main that runs from Lake Keowee to Greenville County.

A preliminary analysis of stream flow figures for the Reedy and Saluda rivers by Dave Hargett, an environmental consultant and senior fellow at the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson University, finds the streams are at historic lows.

Using a statistical tool called a rolling 12-month average flow, Hargett found that 15 of the lowest 20 months on record have occurred in the past seven years on the Reedy River. On the Saluda, Hargett found the same figures held true.

How the Upstate and the state in general deal with water issues over the next few years is of critical importance, said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, the area's largest environmental group.

According to an Upstate Forever report on water resources, the state could run out of water if it is not well managed. South Carolina's biggest threats to the water supply are Georgia, North Carolina, climate change and "us."

The Upstate will increase by 400,000 in population by 2030 and increase developed land by 1 million acres, Wyche said. The growth, particularly in land development, cuts into the amount of land held in drainage area buffers.

The group proposes a 10-step plan to deal with the situation touching on things such as communication and getting along with our neighboring states. Most important, according to Upstate Forever, is developing a plan for dealing with an ever-increasingly scarce resource. That would include drastic changes in water pricing schedules that deeply discount prices for bulk users.

Pickens County's Dennis Chastain, a 20-year veteran on the state's Drought Response Committee, says this drought has turned a corner that he's not experienced before.

"For the first time since I've been on the drought committee we're seriously facing having to go to the governor and ask him to declare mandatory water restrictions (across the Upstate)," he said.

He said residents thought that was going to happen earlier this month, but it wasn't that bad then.

"As things stand now we're headed that way, and in a hurry," he said.

Chastain said there was not enough rain to recharge the region's groundwater last winter and spring.

"If you don't have enough rain during those months, you're not going to get



Photos by Charles Sowell/Staff

RIVER FALLS ENTRANCE: Sprinklers run early in the morning at an entrance to River Falls Plantation off state Route 290 in Spartanburg County.

enough to do the job," he said.

"Fifty percent of any stream, or river's, flow is groundwater," he said. "That comes from deep underground. Streams now are starting to disappear overnight in the Upstate and the little rain we do get in passing showers only caused a momentary blip in any stream's flow. Then things go right back to where they were."

If the region were to have normal rainfall from now to the end of the year, virtually an impossibility considering the forecast, it still wouldn't be enough to deal with the groundwater shortfall.

"Some folks are talking about hoping for a tropical storm or a hurricane to hit the area," he said. "That's like pinning your hopes on a meteorite hitting - it could happen, but the odds are astronomically against it."

As time goes on and the water deficit deepens more and more, small communities will be facing the situation Pickens is in, said Eldridge.

"We're hoping right now that this is the end of a 10-year drought and not the new normal for us. If it is, because of climate change or whatever reason, then we're going to have to make some fundamental changes."

Duke Power's experts emphasize the region is in the midst of a decade-long period of below normal rainfall. Jason Walls, a Duke spokesman, said 2003 was the last year the area got above normal rainfall and the last time before that was prior to 1998.

"That kind of long-term deficit is really going to have an impact," he said.

It is evident in stream flow figures for Duke's mountain lakes. As of Monday, said Walls, the inflow from Lake Jocassee's four rivers and various streams was 51 cubic feet per second (cfs); the evaporation rate was the equivalent of 38 cfs, leaving Duke precious little room to maneuver in maintaining their commitments of water users and power generation.

Other streams in the region report similarly dismal flows. The Middle Tyger River, which supplies SJWD with the bulk of its water dropped to less than 1 cfs on August 4, according to real-time stream flow data from the U.S. Geologic

Survey. Essentially, the stream had stopped flowing.

"The long-term deficit is having a cascade effect now," he said, "And that's reflected in stream flow and lake outflows all down the Savannah River basin."

It is also reflected in U.S. Army Corps of Engineers flow reports for their big lakes on South Carolina's border with Georgia and in the fact that the biggest lakes, Hartwell and Thurmond, are within a half-foot of the Corps trigger level for the highest level of outflow restrictions.

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PICKENS IN TROUBLE: State Drought Response Committee member Dennis Chastain in knee-high grass at the outflow from the Pickens City reservoir; normally, he'd be in hip-deep water.