

Posted on Tue, Apr. 11, 2006

Summer drought threat concerns Southeast climatologists

By Elliott Minor

Associated Press

ALBANY, Ga. - Much of the Southeast is abnormally dry, despite weekend storms that swept through the region, packing thunderstorms and spawning tornadoes that caused massive property damage in Georgia and Tennessee, where at least 12 people died.

The Southeast normally gets most of its rainfall in the fall and winter to recharge lakes and rivers and groundwater supplies, but that didn't happen and the dry conditions have continued into the spring. Virginia had the driest March since record keeping began in 1895, and some shallow wells are already running dry in eastern North Carolina, officials said.

"Things don't look promising," said Ryan Boyles, North Carolina's associate state climatologist. "The outlooks suggest it will be dry over the next three months. ... It looks like we could have a very bad drought summer."

The U.S. Drought Monitor, an online report prepared by several federal agencies, shows normal moisture levels for most of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi and Alabama.

But it classifies Florida, South Carolina, most of Georgia and smaller portions of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana as unusually dry.

A section of central North Carolina is already in a severe drought, while Virginia and most of North Carolina are in a moderate drought.

"We very soon will be past the point where we can expect to recharge our water supplies," said Jerry Stenger, Virginia's assistant state climatologist. "Though this is not a dire situation, it's a situation that we should monitor very closely because problems can crop up very quickly.

"At this point, it's probably difficult to avoid a drought of some magnitude," he said.

David Stooksbury, Georgia's state climatologist, said six months of abnormally dry weather have left Georgia with low soil moisture and low stream flows. The state's major reservoirs have a good supply, but those levels will begin to drop with the arrival of warmer weather.

Tommy Irvin, Georgia's agricultural commissioner, said the weekend storms brought some relief, but overall the state remains dry.

"It's planting time," he said. "We're going to need some more rain."

The dry conditions are a major cause of concern for farmers, whose budgets have already been stretched thin by higher fuel and fertilizer prices. Running diesel-powered irrigation systems to sustain their crops would significantly increase their production costs.

Soon, many farmers will begin planting cotton and peanuts, two of the region's major row crops.

Joe Boddiford, who grows cotton, corn and peanuts in east Georgia's Screven County, along the South Carolina border, said his farm got eight-tenths to 1.4 inches of rain from the weekend storms.

"That put me in pretty good shape for a while," he said in a cell phone interview from his tractor. "But if we don't get rain the rest of the month, we're going to be in trouble."

Because of the slim margins in agriculture, farmers need an ideal growing season, he said. Those who are barely hanging on now might not be able to survive a drought, ushering in a new round of family farm foreclosures, similar to the agricultural exodus that occurred in the early 1980s, said Boddiford, a member of the Georgia Peanut Commission's board of directors.

Stenger said Virginia's farmers may have to rely on moisture from tropical storms and thunderstorms to sustain peach and apple orchards and pastures through the hot summer months.

Boyles said North Carolina officials are concerned about tight water supplies in the central part of the state and a flurry of wildfires in the parched forests.

"This is the time of year that we're normally wet - all the streams are full and the reservoirs and ground water," he said. "But what we're seeing this year is that those water supplies are already at very low levels, and in some areas record low levels. That frightens us for the upcoming summer."

On the Net:

U.S. Drought Monitor: <http://drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html>