

# Hot and dry

## Drought continues grip on county and area

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Brown grass, wilted flowers and crops, and dried up creeks have replaced the usual green fields and bright flower beds that this area experiences during the summer months. Oglethorpe County, along with other areas in the state, is experiencing a record drought, and the situation may get worse before it gets better.

Henry Cabaniss has noted that his commercial dairy farm would be in a lot of trouble if he didn't have a 60-acre lake to pump water out of, but it's costing him a huge amount in electricity each month.

Several people have reported dry creeks in the area, including Moss Creek near Lake Oglethorpe, Town Creek near Lexington, and Grove Creek.

Dr. Rhett Jackson, Associate Professor of Hydrology at the UGA School of Forestry, said that not only is this part of the state experiencing a record drought, but it is also "significantly worse" than the previous record especially from a stream-flow standpoint.

"Some of the local streams are already at half the flow that we had at the previous recorded minimums," he said. "Things

are going to get worse before they get better. The good news is that we as a state seemed to learn some good things from the last drought in 2000."

Jackson went on to explain that even though this current drought is worse

than the previous one, the affected areas are having fewer water supply problems. He believes that the state drought control measures and the local restrictions have had an effect on reducing per capita water demands.

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## Drought

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He said, "In 2000, we were seeing reports that towns couldn't supply water to its citizens, and by and large that hasn't happened so far this year. People are calling and complaining that the streams are dry, but it's because we're under an extreme hydrological condition."

Because of the lowered streams, Jackson said fish were moving downstream and some are dying. He admits that the situation is exacerbated in some areas of the state because of human impacts on the water systems, but feels that in Oglethorpe County at least, the rural streams are simply experiencing a historically unprecedented, but natural, condition.

Although Jackson said there is a lot of variability in terms of how much rainfall the state gets each year, and during which seasons, he said, "We're going to need a good wet spell before we get back to what most people consider normal. It's an unusual thing to be praying for tropical storms, but that's what we really need so we can have a bunch of rain dumped on us."

The current problem, according to Jackson, is that the streams and water levels are already very low, and with no major, constant rain in the weather forecast, they're going to get lower. If the conditions continue as they are for the next month, he believes areas will be witnessing much stricter water restrictions including allowing no watering at all. The Board of Lake Oglethorpe Association is currently considering a request to lower the lake's level from citizens living downstream. Dr. Todd Rasmussen, Professor of Hydrology and Water Resources at UGA, said it was uncertain whether releasing water from the lake would have any benefit downstream. He planned to send

students to the lake to take measurements and conduct some studies that should provide further information.

Dr. Karen Porter, Emeritus Professor of Ecology at UGA said, "There is insufficient water in the lake to sustain a downstream ecosystem during the current drought conditions." She and her students have studied the lake since 1977 and have authored over 150 published scientific studies of Lake Oglethorpe.

She continued, "The lake has been steadily decreasing in depth already during the drought and is not being replenished by inflows, either from upstream or from underground springs. Because of this, any release of water will further lower lake level and damage the lake ecosystem. This is the healthiest lake in the region and should be protected for its unique ecosystem."

Cary Fordyce, Wolfskin Volunteer Fire Department Board Member and Treasurer and past LOA Board Member and President, agreed that the lake should not be lowered for different reasons. He said, "The Wolfskin VFD relies on two tap points on Lake Oglethorpe for fire fighting water. Both tap points would be compromised by a reduction of the lake level."

"Our fund raising to buy a tanker truck is one step in the process to bring more reliable fire suppression to our area, benefitting homeowners by directly protecting their homes and fighting wild-land fires, which are both critical in drought situations such as this," he said. "Both an accessible, reliable water supply and the tanker are critical in improving the ISO rating of our entire area, which in turn lowers our homeowners insurance premiums and improves our prospects for surviving a fire."