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Drought-Stricken South Facing Tough Choices

By **BRENDA GOODMAN**

ATLANTA, Oct. 15 — For the first time in more than 100 years, much of the Southeast has reached the most severe category of drought, climatologists said Monday, creating an emergency so serious that some cities are just months away from running out of water.

In North Carolina, Gov. Michael F. Easley asked residents Monday to stop using water for any purpose “not essential to public health and safety.” He warned that he would soon have to declare a state of emergency if voluntary efforts fell short.

“Now I don’t want to have to use these powers,” Mr. Easley told a meeting of mayors and other city officials. “As leaders of your communities, you know what works best at the local level. I am asking for your help.”

Officials in the central North Carolina town of Siler City estimate that without rain, they are 80 days from draining the Lower Rocky River Reservoir, which supplies water for the town’s 8,200 people.

In the Atlanta metropolitan area, which has more than four million people, worst-case analyses show that the city’s main source of water, Lake Lanier, could be drained dry in 90 to 121 days.

The hard numbers have shocked the Southeast into action, even as many people wonder why things seem to have gotten so bad so quickly.

Last week, Mayor Charles L. Turner of Siler City declared a water shortage emergency and ordered each “household, business and industry” to reduce water use by 50 percent. Penalties for not complying range from stiff fines to the termination of water service.

“It’s really alarming,” said Janice Terry, co-owner of the Best Foods cafeteria in Siler City. To curtail water use, Best Foods has swapped its dishes for paper plates and foam cups.

Most controversially, it has stopped offering tap water to customers, making them buy 69-cent bottles of water instead. “We’ve had people walk out,” Ms. Terry said. “They get mad when they can’t get a free glass of water.”

For the better part of 18 months, cloudless blue skies and high temperatures have shriveled crops and bronzed lawns from North Carolina to Alabama, quietly creating what David E. Stooksbury, the state climatologist of Georgia, has dubbed “the Rodney Dangerfield of natural disasters,” a reference to that comedian’s repeated lament that he got “no respect.”

“People pay attention to [hurricanes](#),” Mr. Stooksbury said. “They pay attention to tornadoes and earthquakes. But a drought will sneak up on you.”

The situation has gotten so bad that by all of Mr. Stooksbury's measures — the percentage of moisture in the soil, the flow rate of rivers, inches of rain — this drought has broken every record in Georgia's history.

Mayor Shirley Franklin of Atlanta, at a news conference last week, begged people in her city to conserve water. "Please, please, please do not use water unnecessarily," Ms. Franklin said. "This is not a test."

Others wondered why the calls to conserve came so late.

"I think there's been an ostrich-head-in-the-sand syndrome that has been growing," said Mark Crisp, an Atlanta-based consultant with the engineering firm C. H. Guernsey. "Because we seem to have been very, very slow in our actions to deal with an impending crisis."

Mr. Crisp is among a chorus of experts who have warned for years that Atlanta is asking too much of Lake Lanier, a situation quickly being compounded by an absence of rain.

Many had hoped that hurricane season, as it has in the past, would bring several soaking storms to the Southeast to replenish reservoirs that are at or near all-time lows. But the longed-for rains never materialized, and now in October, traditionally the driest month, significant rainfall remains out of the picture.

"We're in a stressful situation now," Mr. Crisp said, "but come next spring, if we don't have substantial rainfall this winter, these reservoirs are not going to refill."

That would leave metro Atlanta dry in the summer, which traditionally has the highest water use of the year.

Others pointed to the Southeast's inexperience with drought and to explosive growth in population as complicating factors.

"In the West, people expect that it's dry, and you're going to have drought situations," said Michael J. Hayes, director of the National Drought Mitigation Center at the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#). "In the Southeast, people think of it as being wet, and I think that mindset makes it tougher to identify worst-case scenarios and plan to that level."

"Here's the fly in the ointment," Mr. Hayes added. "The vulnerability in the Southeast has changed. Population shifts, increased competition and demand for water has increased, so that's made this drought worse than it might have been."

Within two weeks, Carol Couch, director of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, is expected to send Gov. Sonny Perdue recommendations on tightening water restrictions, which may include mandatory cutbacks on commercial and industrial users.

If that happens, experts at the National Drought Mitigation Center said, it would be the first time a major metropolitan area in the United States had been forced to take such drastic action to save its water supply.

"The situation is very dire," Mr. Hayes said.

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