

Drought and Fire and Rain, Oh My!

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Staff writer

The drought in 2016 began in March and only became more severe as the year progressed. Some areas in the mountains are looking at 25 inches below average rainfall.

March of 2016 was 2.27 inches below average and the number has simply continued to rise during the year. In June, Transylvania County was announced to be in a severe drought. In October, Transylvania moved into the category of extreme drought along with Buncombe and Henderson Counties. During this month, the French Broad River was only running at 471 cubic feet per second (cfs) instead of the normal 1,020 cfs.

Now in December, rain has finally fallen and there is a hint of winter weather coming into the mix this upcoming weekend. However, the damage from the drought is far from done.

This severe drought has led to numerous wildfires across the south and in response created terrible air quality for surrounding areas. In WNC, wildfires have burned about 70,000 acres this year.

The air quality has been as much a visual an-

noyance as a threat to many locals. Transylvania County was under a code red air quality which meant that everyone was advised to avoid prolonged outdoor activities. The elderly, children and those with heart conditions and respiratory ailments should avoid outdoor activity as much as possible under these conditions.

At the end of November, there were around 2,100 firefighters that remained in WNC to continue battling the wildfires. They had 3 aircrafts in assistants and 42 states were represented. The firefighters worked 16-hour days in two week shifts.

Most of the larger fires in Western North Carolina were between 100 and 85 percent contained at the beginning of this week. The continuation of rain in the forecast is assisting in restricting the rest of the flames from getting out of control again as of this past Sunday.

While conditions were perfect for fires to spread quickly, there was no lightening in the area during the beginning stages of any of the fires. "In North Carolina, 99 percent of our fires are human caused," said Lisa Jennings, public information officer with the U.S. Forest Service.

This could include a careless cigarette, campfires getting out of control or arson.

There was a burn ban in effect for Transylvania County along with 46 other counties in North Carolina. Luckily, the much needed rain has removed the ban for Transylvania and 31 other counties.

Jon Rieck, the U.S. Forest Service fire analyst, confirmed it is the same pattern being view in Southern California and in the Rocky Mountains. In his career, Rieck has never had to fly east to assist with wildfires.

If the mountains of WNC want to be out of the deficit rainfall, there will need to be more than 180 percent of an average rain and snow before March 1, 2017.

The new weather is a complete change of season for the warm fall weather that has remained throughout November. The Farmer's Almanac, which is correct 50 percent of the time, is predicting a wet winter with "penetrating cold." Opposite to the Farmer's Almanac, The Climate Prediction Center is predicting a warmer than normal winter with higher than normal chances for a below average amount of rain and snow.



Photo courtesy of John Padgett

Umbrellas and jackets came out around campus as rain finally hit Brevard after weeks of drought.