

"Rain helps, but drought risk persists," *Winchester Star*, May 6, 2009

Rain helps, but drought risk persists

By Drew Houff
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WINCHESTER — A wet start to May might signal some relief in the area's drought conditions, but that could change quickly should the region experience more than a week without precipitation.

That harsh outlook remains the standard for the northern Shenandoah Valley, which had an unseasonably dry winter.

Richard Hitchens, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service's office in Sterling, said in a telephone interview Tuesday that the area's rainfall remains below average despite about six inches of precipitation since the beginning of April.

According to NWS, the area received 8.3 inches of rain during the first four months of 2009, down from the average of 11.22 inches for the period.

The rainfall has registered 2.25 inches in the first five days of May; the average for the month is 3.65 inches, according to information on weather.com.

The area will need another 4.22 inches this month to catch up with the average of 14.87 inches usually recorded through May.

The rain that has fallen since Friday morning, however, has started to replenish supplies.

Brian Fuchs, a climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said the relatively dry winter has complicated water tables in this region.

The lingering dryness in Virginia, he said in a telephone interview Tuesday, has created conditions which lead to runoff during downpours.

The drier ground may not soak up the rain as well as areas where rain has fallen, leading to the runoff.

“The winter was just abnormally dry, with not much precipitation to speak of,” Fuchs said. “The rains have been spotty, with several places hit or miss in rainfall.”

The unusual weather has caused conditions in which plants have delayed their seasons — due to the effects of cooler weather and drought stress, he said.

Fuchs said various soil types also create conditions that make drought situations even worse.

“What is unique with drought is that the rain struggles going into the soil,” he said. “Right away that shows you [that you] are still pretty vulnerable.”

He said the region likely will receive continued rain during the next few weeks. And if the rainfall is normal in June and July, the area should not experience drought-like conditions, he added.

“I think the conditions for the rain are good,” Fuchs said. “We are not out of the woods, though. A little bit of dryness that lasts a couple of weeks could create drought conditions again.”

The NWS forecast calls for rain in the Winchester area during six of the next 10 days.

...drought.unl.edu/
www.erh.noaa.gov/er/lwx

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