

We are in a severe drought in Western Carolina, and for that matter, the vast majority of the state. More than likely, relief will not be in the immediate future.

Jason Boyer, the WLOS Meteorologist, analyzed the drought in a broadcast last week. He pointed out that Western Carolina was in a 13-inch rainfall deficit for the year, which had triggered severe drought and dangerous wildfire conditions.

Boyer did the numbers projecting when drought relief will come. His prognosis was not encouraging. The probability of recouping the 13-inch rainfall deficit within the next 30 days is about 2%. For the region to make up the rain shortfall over the next 60 days, the probability is about 12%. If we go out to 90 days, the chance of breaking the drought is only around 30%.

After hearing Boyer's analysis, my worries have intensified. Highlands and WNC could very easily be in drought conditions well into the summer and even in the fall. Of course, our fire department will be on high alert for potential wildfires. All area fire departments have mutual aid agreements, so there will be a large response to any fire in the mountains.

For example, last Thursday, Commissioner Eric Pierson arrived very late to the town workshop. He had a very valid excuse. As a volunteer firefighter, he was fighting a wildfire out near Flat Mountain Road. Multiple units responded to the fire, and it took some time to get it under control. Commissioner Pierson emphasizes that there should be no outside burning period, no exceptions.

A statewide outdoor burning ban is in effect. Please do not call me about exceptions to the ban's conditions; it is absolute, no outside burning. One person in the area was recently burning debris in their yard and had a water hose nearby. The problem occurred when sparks flew up and left the property, igniting a section of a mountain next to the home. The hose did no good. A huge response was needed to get the wildfire under control.

Also, if you see an outside fire, such as burning materials at a construction site, please contact the nonemergency dispatch number. A first responder will be dispatched to the site to investigate. That nonemergency number is (828) 524-2020.

To break this drought, the region needs rainstorms that linger and dump many inches of water. A quick-moving front that drops a few tenths of an inch of rain is nice immediate relief, especially for washing away pollen, but the showers do not alleviate the dry conditions. Heat and wind after a rain shower return us to drought conditions very quickly.

The town water plant operators are also watching the situation. Highlands depends on surface water for its drinking water source. We may have to institute water restrictions measures at a later date. These restrictions normally come in prescribed stages; for now, we are doing ok, and water conservation is always a good thing.

Unfortunately, these dry conditions affect our businesses, especially landscapers, farmers, trout fishing guides, and recreation providers. Let us all hope and pray that heavy rains are on the horizon. They cannot come fast enough.