

**N.C. Department of Environmental Quality  
Division of Water Resources**

**N.C. Drought Management Advisory Council Annual Report  
July 1, 2017–June 30, 2018**

**Introduction**

The N.C. Drought Management Advisory Council (DMAC), created as required by North Carolina General Statute 143-355.1, coordinates drought monitoring, assessment, and response activities between State and Federal agencies, public water systems, and water users. The objective of the DMAC is to provide consistent and accurate information on drought conditions to these entities, the U.S. Drought Monitor, the Environmental Management Commission, the Secretary of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality, the N.C. Environmental Review Commission, and the public in order to manage and mitigate the harmful effects of drought. In accordance with statutory requirements, the council must submit an annual report to the Secretary of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality, the Governor and the N.C. Environmental Review Commission by October 1<sup>st</sup> of each year.

**Drought Overview 2017–2018**

**Climate Summary – State Climate Office**

*Temperature and Precipitation*

For the 12-month period from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018, North Carolina's precipitation was near normal, averaging 48.90 inches, or 0.42 inches below the 1901-2000 mean annual precipitation. The driest month in this period was November, which only saw an average of 1.3 inches across the state, or 1.72 inches below the 20th-century mean. For the 12-month period, only October 2017, April 2018, and May 2018 saw above-normal precipitation, but these months were marked by amounts more than an inch above the long-term normal; May 2018, for example, saw 2.6 inches above normal precipitation.

Average temperatures for the same period were 1.4°F warmer than the 1901-2000 period mean, with 9 of the 12 months having temperatures that were above their historic monthly average. Of note, February 2018 was the warmest February ever recorded in the state at 9.9°F above normal, and May 2018 ranked as the 3rd-warmest May on

record with average temperature 5.2°F above normal. Only January, March, and April were cooler than normal; in fact, February 2018 was 5.6°F warmer than March 2018.

### Temperature and Precipitation Rankings

| Month  | Precipitation (deviation from normal)                     | Mean Temperature (deviation from normal)        |
|--|---|---|
| July 2017  | 4.49 inches (-1.18 inches)<br>38th Driest / 87th Wettest  | 78.7°F (+1.8°F)<br>108th Coolest / 17th Warmest |
| August 2017  | 5.15 inches (-0.13 inches)<br>69th Driest / 55th Wettest  | 75.9°F (+0.3°F)<br>67th Coolest / 57th Warmest  |
| September 2017   | 3.86 inches (-0.43 inches)<br>58th Driest / 66th Wettest  | 70.5°F (+0.2°F)<br>70th Coolest / 54th Warmest  |
| October 2017   | 4.37 inches (+1.10 inches)<br>95th Driest / 29th Wettest  | 62.8°F (+3.2°F)<br>113th Coolest / 11th Warmest |
| November 2017  | 1.30 inches (-1.72 inches)<br>15th Driest / 109th Wettest | 50.3°F (+1.0°F)<br>76th Coolest / 48th Warmest  |
| December 2017  | 2.85 inches (-0.82 inches)<br>39th Driest / 85th Wettest  | 42.4°F (+0.9°F)<br>77th Coolest / 47th Warmest  |
| January 2018   | 3.79 inches (-0.12 inches)<br>66th Driest / 59th Wettest  | 35.9°F (-4.1°F)<br>20th Coolest / 105th Warmest |
| February 2018  | 3.07 inches (-0.76 inches)<br>40th Driest / 85th Wettest  | 51.8°F (+9.9°F)<br>124th Coolest / 1st Warmest  |
| March 2018   | 4.10 inches (-0.19 inches)<br>61st Driest / 64th Wettest  | 46.2°F (-3.1°F)<br>20th Coolest / 105th Warmest |
| April 2018   | 5.14 inches (+1.60 inches)<br>110th Driest / 15th Wettest | 56.0°F (-1.8°F)<br>23rd Coolest / 102nd Warmest |
| May 2018   | 6.79 inches (+2.80 inches)<br>122nd Driest / 3rd Wettest  | 71.6°F (+5.2°F)<br>122nd Coolest / 3rd Warmest  |
| June 2018  | 3.99 inches (-0.58 inches)<br>50th Driest / 75th Wettest  | 76.8°F (+3.2°F)<br>115th Coolest / 10th Warmest |
| July 2017 - June 2018  | 48.9 inches (-0.42 inches)<br>55th Driest / 69th Wettest  | 59.9°F (+1.4°F)<br>106th Coolest / 18th Warmest |
| <p><i>Precipitation and temperature values and rankings were obtained from the NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information: <a href="https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/statewide/rankings/31">https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/statewide/rankings/31</a><br/>Monthly average values are compared against the 1900-2001 normals.</i></p> |   |   |

## Summary of Weather Patterns

Entering the summer of 2017, there was no drought or abnormal dryness present in North Carolina. However, above-normal temperatures combined with slightly below-normal rainfall during the summer contributed to a drying trend across the state, with Abnormally Dry (Drought Class D0) conditions appearing in early August. The driest conditions were concentrated in North Carolina's Piedmont and persisted into the fall as the region consistently missed out on rains, such as those associated with the remnants of Hurricane Irma in September. Figure 1 shows fall conditions reported by the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow Network (CoCoRaHS).

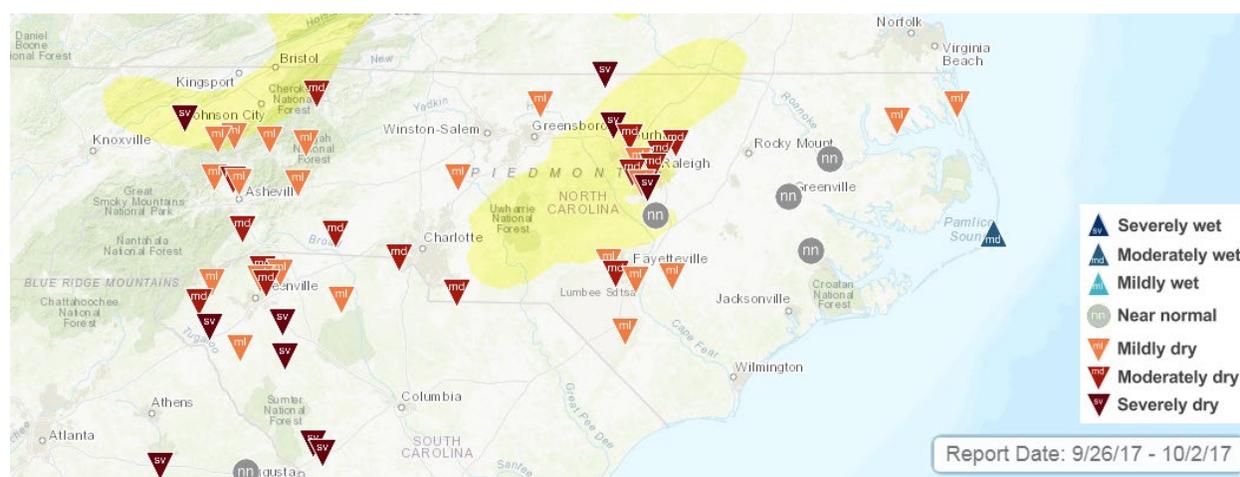


Figure 1. CoCoRaHS Condition Monitoring reports submitted by observers from September 26 through October 2 reveal drying conditions across much of the state.

By late October, Moderate Drought (Drought Class D1) appeared in a few parts of North Carolina, and a dry November -- the 15th-driest on record -- exacerbated conditions across the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. December saw some relief in the form of precipitation in southeastern North Carolina, but little precipitation in other areas led to a westward expansion of D0 and D1.

Although our winter was influenced by a moderate La Niña pattern, which often results in drier weather in the southeast US, enough precipitation fell over drought-affected areas to bring improvements in soil moisture, streamflow, and reservoir levels. By late March, no drought remained in the state, although Abnormally Dry conditions persisted in areas of the Piedmont and western Coastal Plain.

As temperatures warmed and the spring season began in earnest, the driest part of the state shifted east, falling along a north-south line roughly following the I-95 corridor. April saw an active weather pattern, including several tornadoes that damaged buildings and homes in the Piedmont.

Although temperatures ramped up in May, the month saw a statewide average of 6.79 inches of precipitation, or 2.8 inches above normal. Much of this precipitation fell in the Mountains, leading to swollen rivers, flooding and deadly landslides. Elsewhere, these late-spring rains were enough to remove all drought or dry conditions from the map in early June.

### **Streamflow and Groundwater - USGS**

At the beginning of the annual period (July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018), [USGS WaterWatch](#) streamflow maps depicted a mix of conditions generally in the normal ranges across the State, but with below-normal ranges in effect at some USGS streamgages across western North Carolina. Streamflow conditions alternating between mostly normal ranges with episodes of expanding below-normal ranges across central North Carolina were characteristic of the late summer and fall seasons until widespread much below-normal conditions became entrenched across the State during December and early January. During these two months, widespread “less than 10th percentile” flows as well as record-low streamflows (for the calendar date) were in effect. Overall streamflow conditions in early February again began to vary widely between above- and below-normal cycles with much of the below-normal conditions generally confined to the central parts of the State. In late April, an increasing frequency of storm systems as well as occurrences of beneficial rainfall amounts across the State began to improve streamflow conditions, most notably in the Blue Ridge and western Piedmont streams. From May into early June, much-above normal streamflow conditions (greater than 90th percentile) were in effect for the western half of North Carolina with mostly normal streamflow ranges elsewhere. At the end of the annual period, the frequency of storm systems declined and streamflows were shifting back towards mostly normal ranges across the State with a small presence of below-normal conditions in the western Piedmont.

Figure 2 shown below indicates the percentage of USGS streamgages in North Carolina with 7- day flows less than the 25th, 10th, and 1st percentiles (or record-low for the calendar date) during the annual period.

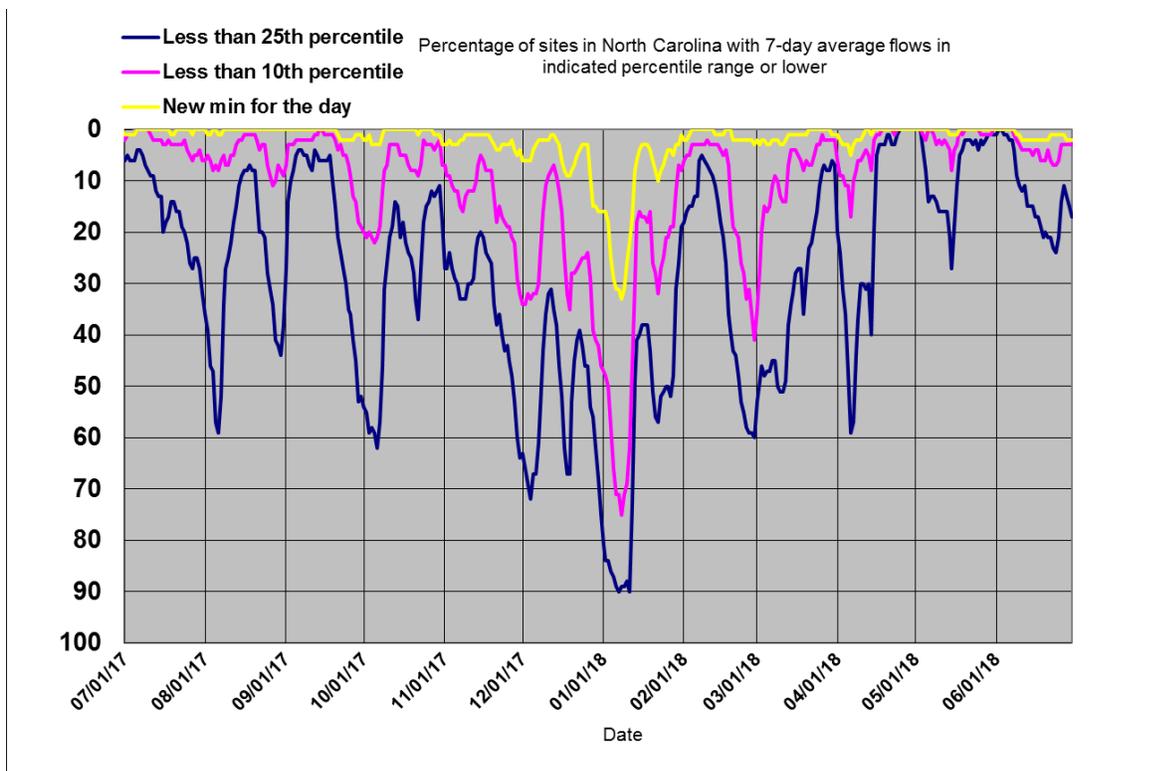


Figure 2. 7-day Flow Percentiles for USGS Streamgages in North Carolina

Below-normal streamflow conditions gradually expanded during the summer and early fall seasons with the percentages of USGS streamgages across North Carolina having 7-day average streamflow percentiles below the 25th and 10th percentiles reaching 90 and 75 percent, respectively, in early January. These percentages are lower than the maximum values (99 and 91 percent, respectively) observed during the previous annual period (2016 - 2017). Beginning in early February and lasting through mid-April, streamflow conditions varied widely between alternating cycles of above and below-normal conditions. During this late winter and early spring period, the percentage of below-normal 7- and 28-day streamflows increased and decreased by 50+ percentage points. However, from latter April through end of June, the frequency of storm systems crossing parts of the state were sufficient to improve overall streamflow conditions such that the percentage of below-normal conditions was less than 30 percent during the last two months of the annual period.

Examination of provisional daily discharges indicates no new period of record minimum daily mean discharges were set at USGS streamgages across North Carolina during the annual period. Likewise, no new periods of record minimum monthly average discharge were set for any of the USGS streamgages within the State. However, provisional new record minimum monthly average discharges were set during December 2017 and January 2018 at four streamgages across the north central Piedmont within the upper

Roanoke, Cape Fear, and Yadkin River basins. U.S Drought Monitor conditions depicted for North Carolina during December and most of January were D0 across the Blue Ridge and Coastal Plain regions accompanied by D1 across the Piedmont.

Groundwater levels at 16 USGS observation wells within the [N.C. Climate Response Network](#) varied widely during July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018. Water levels in the wells reflect the climate conditions (occurrence of precipitation), but temporal changes are also affected by individual well characteristics (e.g. well depth, surrounding material through which the water moves).

Water levels at the four Blue Ridge observation wells in this network were generally sustained in the normal and above-normal ranges throughout much of the annual period. However, brief periods of below-normal water levels were noted during some months. The most notable instance was much-below normal ranges (less than 10th percentile) at the USGS well at Marble in Cherokee County during January and early February. A new January monthly minimum water level of 6.95 ft. below land surface was observed at the Marble well on January 27, 2018. Frequent and beneficial rainfalls during May resulted in the Blue Ridge water levels remaining sustained in the above- and much-above normal ranges through the end of June 2018.

Water levels in three Piedmont wells (Langtree well in Iredell County, Piedmont Research Station in Rowan County, and Mocksville well in Davie County) were likewise generally in the normal or above-normal ranges through much of the annual period. Exceptions to this pattern included below-normal water levels observed at the Langtree and Mocksville wells during parts or all of the period from November through early February. No periods of record minimum or maximum water levels were set during the annual period at these three Piedmont wells, but a new monthly maximum water level (6.70 ft. below land surface) for September was set on September 12, 2017.

As with the Blue Ridge and Piedmont wells, the water levels in the Marston well (Sand Hills region) also were in the normal ranges throughout the annual period, with exception of April when water levels were in the below-normal ranges for the month. Among the six wells in the Coastal Plain, water levels varied widely among the above-normal, normal, and below-normal ranges throughout the year. Such wide variations reflect the quick response of water levels to climatic conditions in shallow wells common in the Coastal Plain. No new record monthly minimum water levels were observed among the six wells during the period, but multiple instances of new record monthly maximum water levels were observed at all six sites.

## **Forest Resources – NC Forest Service**

Weather impacts had a minimal effect on forestry and wildfire operations across the state during the past year. There were some localized issues with tree planting this winter due to excess moisture that required later planting than normal. However, there were no reports of tracts not being planted due to wet conditions.

From July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018, the N.C. Forest Service (NCFS) responded to 4,371 wildfires across the state that burned approximately 12,542 acres on state and private lands. The number of fires decreased by approximately 5 percent, while the number of acres decreased by approximately 83 percent over the previous year. The number of fires was approximately 10 percent greater than the 10-year average. The total number of acres burned was 38 percent lower than the 10-year average. There were 71,409 acres on state and private lands which were treated with prescribed fire during the past fiscal year, a 10 percent decrease from the previous year. This decrease is most likely due to drier conditions last year that allowed for more burning days.

Initially reported last year, pine bark beetle activity is increasing across the southeastern U.S., including extreme western North Carolina. Pine bark beetles (such as southern pine beetle and *Ips* engraver beetles) are opportunistic; drought-stressed trees, even years after drought subsides, are more susceptible to attack, especially in over-mature, unmanaged, predominantly southern pine stands. NCFS field personnel are performing aerial surveys statewide and monitoring outbreaks.

## **Agriculture - North Carolina Cooperative Extension**

June and July 2017, saw good to ideal growing conditions across the state with the traditional dryness setting into the piedmont in early August. By late August, dry conditions were impacting soybeans and some tobacco in the northern piedmont. By late September harvest of most crops was well under way, even though Hurricane Irma dumped some extra rain on parts of the state.

October saw D1 conditions throughout parts of the Piedmont, with agricultural impacts limited primarily to vegetable crops and slowed planting of small grains. Harvest of tobacco was starting to wind down, with soybean and cotton harvest well underway. Across the state, corn and soybean yields were basically average for, year over year. By late November, with D0 moving into the northeastern part of the state, soybean and cotton harvest was winding down, so agricultural impacts of the dry weather were minimal.

Two-thousand eighteen got off to a warm and wet start across most of the state, with a few exceptions at the higher elevations of the northwest mountains. By mid-April many farmers were deep into planting corn, bedding tobacco, and the strawberries that escaped the freeze in the east, were doing well. Wet conditions in some southeastern counties were keeping farmers out of the fields. By late April, drier weather was allowing farmers back into the fields to plant or in some cases replant corn. Abnormal dryness reached south to north along the I-95 corridor but with no reported impacts on crops. The end of May saw extensive rain across most of the state, again keeping farmers out of fields and hampering wheat harvest.

By mid-June, only one county, Robeson, identified dry conditions severe enough to impact corn development. Some producers were still struggling to get crops planted and nitrogen applied. By the end of June, hit and miss dryness had settled into counties from the foothills to the coast with some counties still reporting wet conditions. Small grain production was off of 2017 numbers in some counties that experienced too much rain, but most crops looked good by end of this reporting period.

With a few exceptions, crop production in North Carolina for 2017 was close to average. Strawberries and some of the other truck crops were reduced slightly by early season freezes, but most crops had enough moisture and growing degree days to overcome any negative impacts. Upland cotton was up 114 percent, winter wheat was up 42 percent and peanuts were up 37 percent.

### **Drought Condition Summary**

The July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018 period began with no areas of the state in abnormally dry (D0) or drought (D1 to D4) conditions (see Figure 3). Conditions began to worsen in late July 2017. During the past year, the worst drought conditions in North Carolina occurred in the fall and early winter. Over 80 percent of the state was classified as D0 or D1 on January 2nd, 2018. Drought conditions for the 2017 – 2018 period peaked during the week of January 23rd, 2018. Heavy rains across much of the state at the beginning of February 2018 significantly improved conditions. No areas of the state were in drought or an abnormally condition by early May. These normal conditions remained through the end of May 2018.

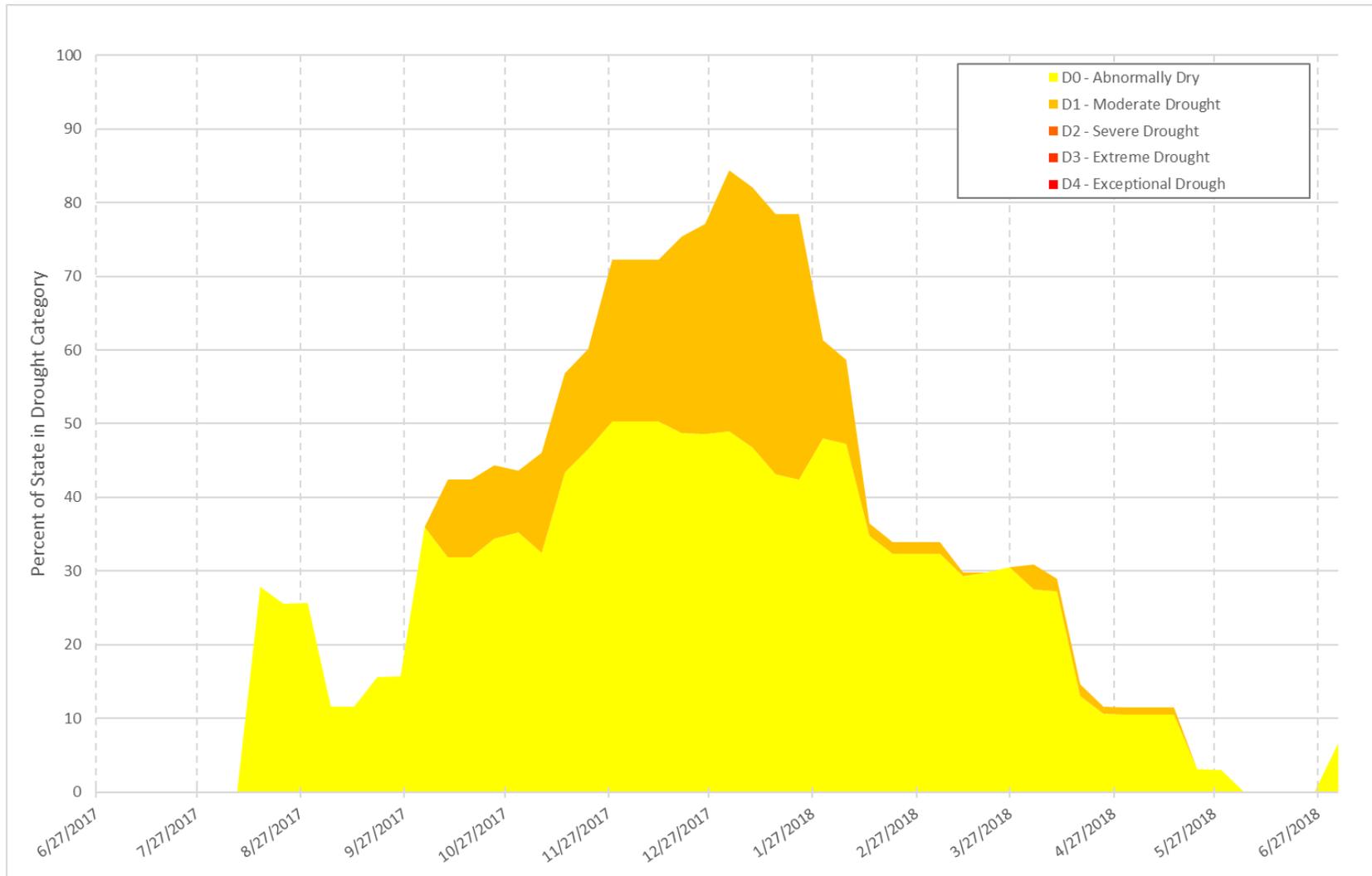


Figure 3. Drought Levels from July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018

The dry conditions which began in the Fall of 2017 were initially of limited concern. Rainfall is often lowest during this time of the year, residential use is dropping, farmers are generally hoping for dry weather so they can harvest, and critical periods for much of the North Carolina ecosystem is past. The Fall of 2017 was much drier than normal however. Parts of the Piedmont saw a deficit of 8 to 10 inches from September 1 through November 30, 2017. By this time, approximately 50 percent of the state was considered abnormally dry and an additional 22 percent was in moderate drought (see Figure 4).

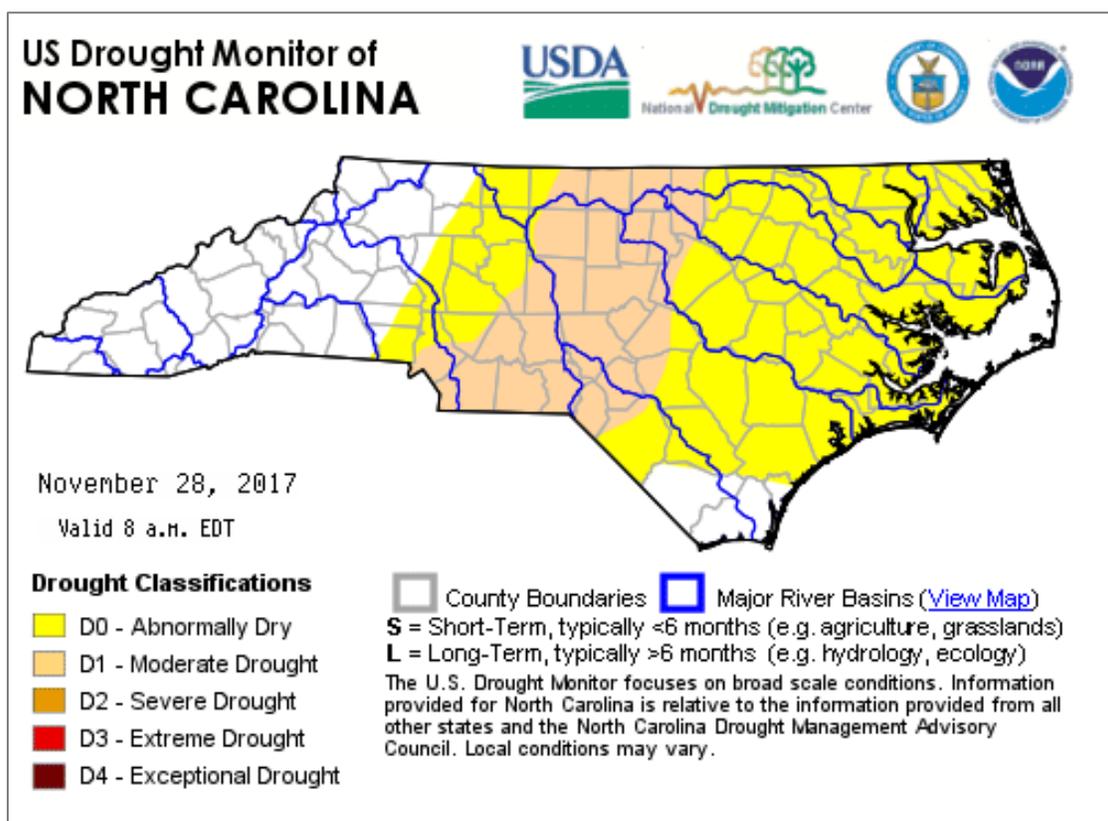


Figure 4. North Carolina Drought Classification (late November)

The dryness continued into the winter which is usually a wetter time of year. The state did see sporadic, widespread rainfall in December and January but saw an additional deficit of 2 inches in all areas except for the central and southern coast. While most water needs are low during the winter, it is an important time for recharge of groundwater and recovery of reservoirs. Reservoir storage was the primary impact seen during the 2017 – 2018 moderate drought period. By mid-January Jordan Lake had only 48 percent of its water quality pool remaining. Falls Lake had about 60 percent of its water quality pool remaining. The water supply pool was near 100 percent at Jordan Lake but down to 73 percent at Falls Lake.

Dry conditions peaked during the week of January 2, 2018. At this time part or all of 38 counties were experiencing moderate drought conditions. Approximately 50 percent of the state was considered abnormally dry and an additional 35 percent was in moderate drought. No areas in the state reached the severe drought (D2) stage. Other systems in the Piedmont, such as Durham, were also seeing reductions in their water supply availability. The Jordan, Falls, and Kerr reservoirs all reduced flow releases over the winter to maintain water storage. Energy was purchased by the Southeast Power Administration to reduce hydropower production obligations at the Kerr Lake Dam.

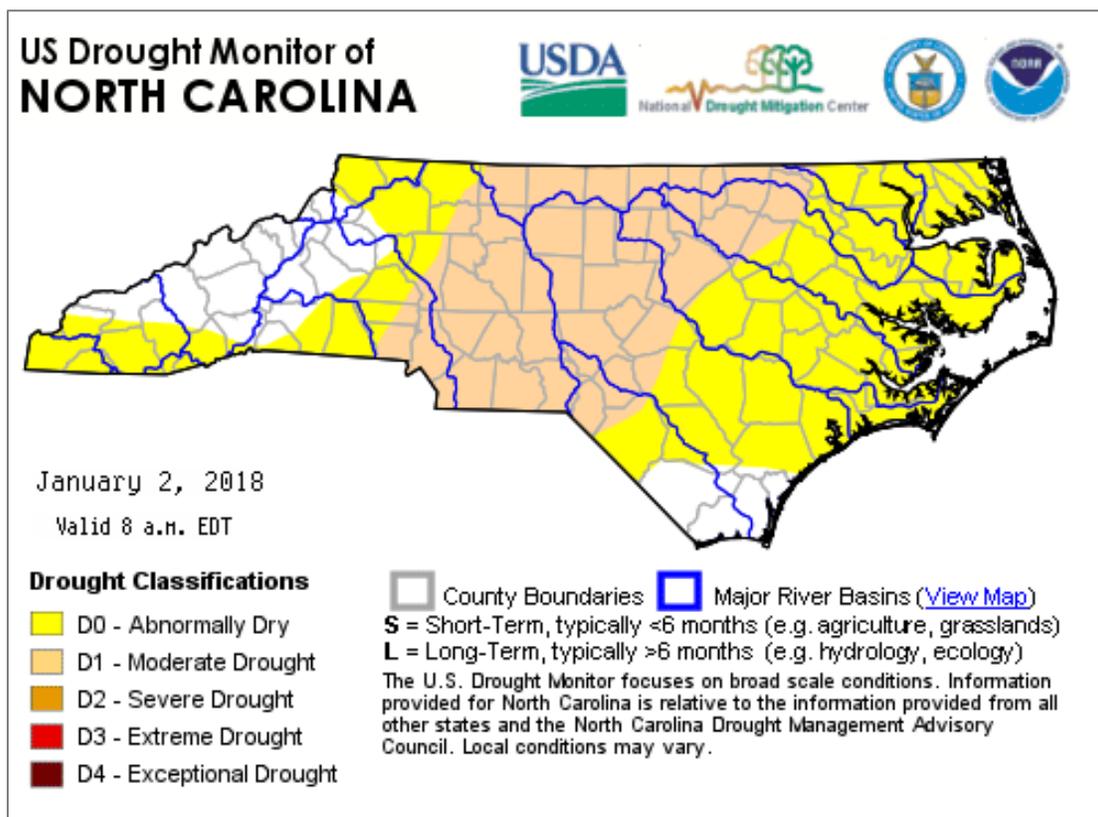


Figure 5. North Carolina Drought Classification (early January)

Conditions saw a significant improvement in February 2018 with less than two percent of the state in moderate drought by February 13, 2018. Further improvements occurred gradually throughout the Spring with no drought designations statewide by early June 2018.

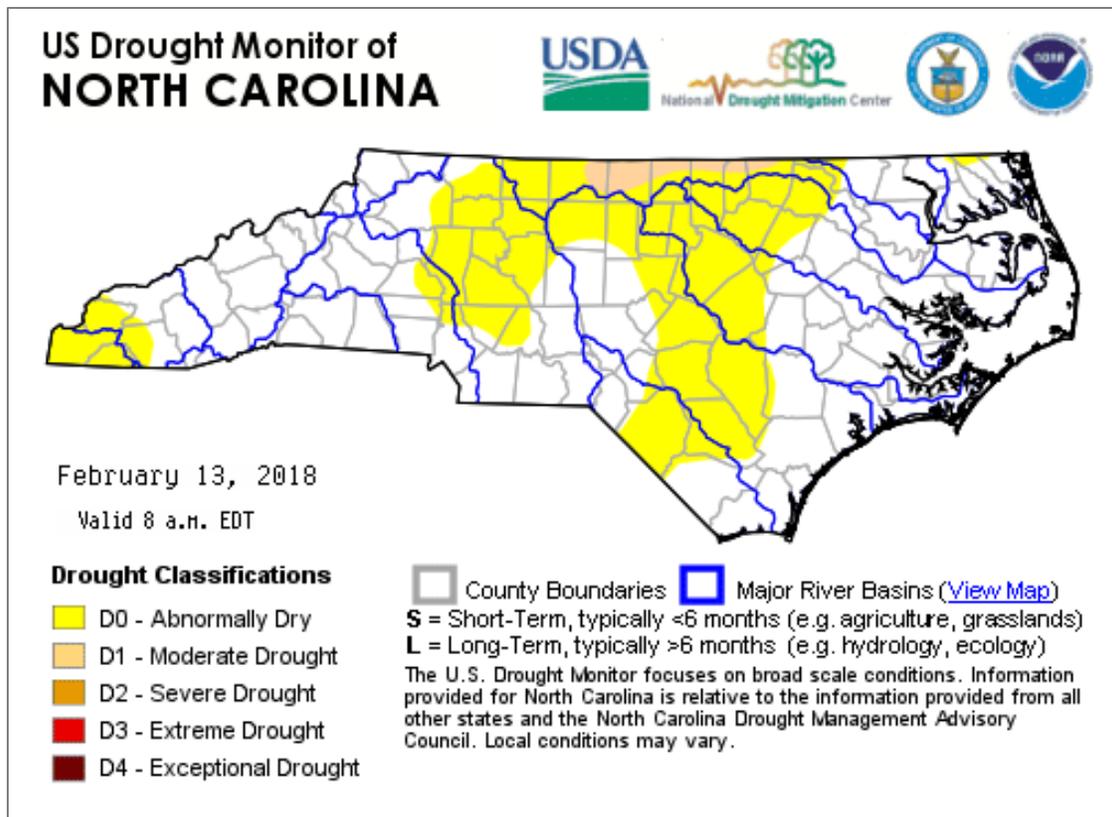


Figure 6. North Carolina Drought Classification (mid-February)

During the worst period of the drought, part or all of 48 counties were abnormally dry and an additional 38 counties were experiencing moderate drought conditions.

### Historical Perspective

Due to the natural variability of climate, drought may occur at some location in the state. In recent history, 2003 was the only year where no drought occurred in any part of the state. More typically, we see a moderate part of the state with abnormally dry conditions and a much smaller area in moderate drought. Severe drought or worse conditions do occur in many years but the extent is often limited. The areas that are affected also shift throughout the year as localized rainfall either hits or misses locations. In this context, the 2017 – 2018 period was fairly typical for drought conditions.

Analysis using one of the standard drought assessment metrics, the Palmer Drought Hydrologic Index (PDHI), provides insight into long-term drought conditions for North Carolina (See Figure 2). Similar to the standard deviation of a normal distribution in statistics, PDHI values within +/- 2 reflect typical conditions. Values outside of this range show either very wet (positive) or very dry (negative) conditions. Values above +4 and below -4 reflect very extreme conditions.

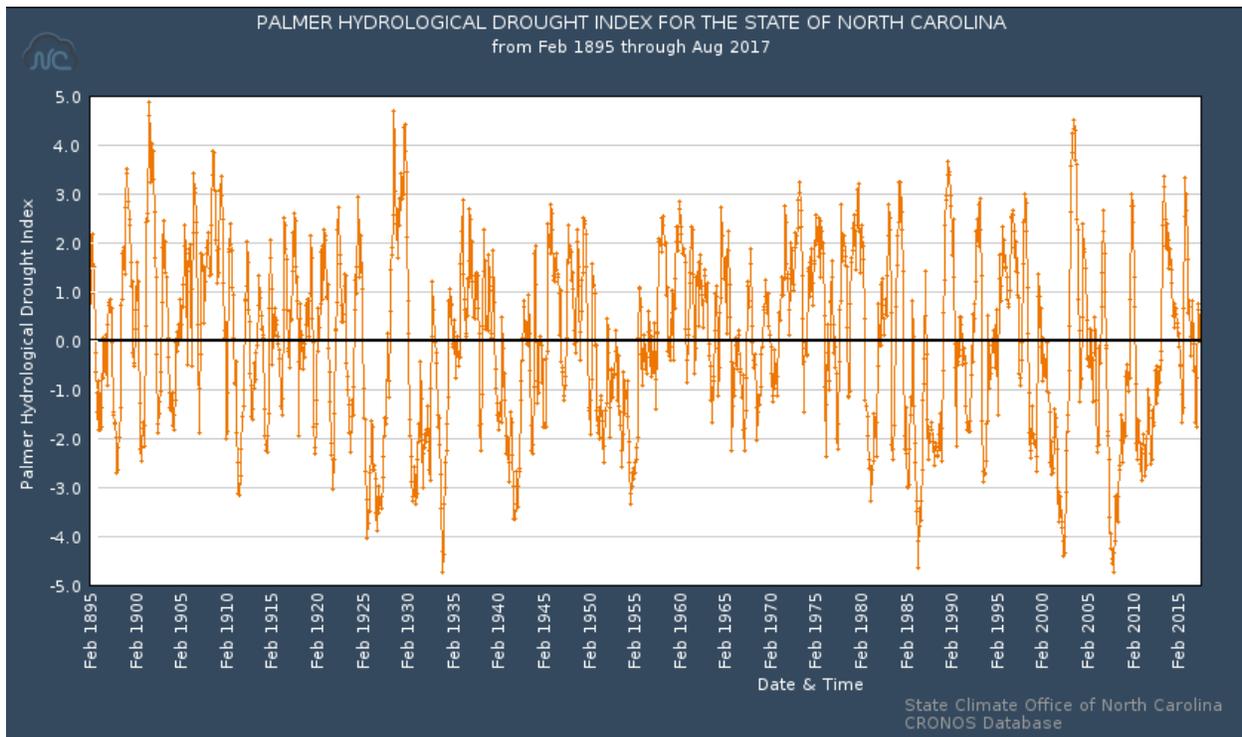


Figure 2. Palmer Hydrologic Drought Index since 1895. Source: NC SCO, 2018

North Carolina experienced extreme drought conditions from 1925 through 1927 with PDHI values reaching -4.1 at one point. A very wet period followed and then an extreme drought occurred in 1932 - 1933. This extreme drought period saw the lowest individual monthly PDHI value of -4.74. Occasional, moderate droughts occur in the 1940's and 1950's but it wasn't until the late 1980's that extreme drought returned. The PDHI reached a low of -4.6 in July 1986. Moderate to wet conditions returned in the 1990's but two of the most extreme droughts in North Carolina's recorded meteorological history occurred between 2000 and 2010. One of the wettest years also occurred during this period. Since 2010, conditions have been less extreme but highly variable swinging from moderately wet to moderately dry. No clear trend is seen but it does appear that more extreme swings in conditions are likely.

The Southern Piedmont, Central Piedmont, and Northern Piedmont reached PDHI values of -3.32, -2.81, and -2.72, respectively, in December 2017 (NOAA, 2018). The Southern Piedmont, Central Piedmont, and Northern Piedmont reached PDHI values of -3.23, -2.73, and -2.53, respectively, in January 2018. Those values place those months, the worst of the dry period, in the moderate category. Therefore the 2017 – 2018 period was moderate in dryness and fairly limited in spatial extent relative to the values shown in Figure 2.

## **Council Meetings**

Drought conditions in North Carolina are updated weekly through an audio-video telecon with a Technical Drought Advisory Team, which is a sub-group of the NC DMAC. The team consists of experts on climate, weather, hydrology, water supply, forestry, and agriculture that report each week on streams flows, groundwater levels, reservoirs levels, wildfire activity, water supplies, and crop conditions. Based on this information, the team makes a recommendation to the U.S. Drought Monitor author on the state's drought conditions for that week. Those recommendations are used to draw the national drought map each Thursday. To see or download a copy of the current drought map, go to the state's official drought website at: [www.ncdrought.org](http://www.ncdrought.org).

The DMAC is required by law to meet in person at least once each calendar year. The annual council meeting was held April 12, 2018 at 10 a.m. with 41 representatives and associates of the council in attendance. Items discussed at the meeting included current conditions on stream flow and ground water levels, lake and reservoir levels, agriculture, forestry and public water systems.

## **References:**

NOAA. 2018. Climate at a Glance. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. Website : <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/divisional/mapping/31/phdi/201711/1/value> . Accessed July 25, 2018.

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