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Charlotte drought less severe

Recent rains put total above normal for year, though groundwater recovers slowly.

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The recent rainfall is beginning to lift the Charlotte area out of a drought that has lasted for more than a year, according to a map of drought conditions released Thursday.

The U.S. Drought Monitor, a widely watched index that's updated weekly, shows Mecklenburg and counties to the west and north in severe drought. That's one stage better than the extreme drought classification of two weeks ago. Cabarrus and Union counties are rated in moderate drought.

More good news: the Drought Monitor describes conditions as of Tuesday, before the 1.6 inches of rain that fell on Charlotte on Wednesday. The city's rainfall total is now slightly above normal for the year.

But severe droughts don't die easily. It takes months for groundwater to recover even after steady rain returns.

Most drought-indicator wells in the Catawba and Yadkin river basins near Charlotte are still far below normal. The water in a well at Mecklenburg County's Hornets Nest Park rose about two feet after heavy rain in late August, but has lost a foot since then.

"I would be reluctant to say the drought is over, for sure," said U.S. Geological Survey scientist Jerad Bales, director of the N.C. Water Science Center.

The N.C. Drought Management Advisory Council, in a statement Thursday, strongly urged continued conservation.

Concord, Kannapolis and three Cabarrus County towns will relax their water restrictions to allow lawn irrigation and car washing on Saturdays, beginning tomorrow.

Twice-weekly watering of shrubs and gardens with hoses will also be allowed.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities, like most Catawba River communities, will revisit their water restrictions at the end of the month. Most have been under some form of restrictions for more than a year.

"I don't think a change is imminent, but the (improving) conditions warrant a good, hard look,"

said Maeneen Klein, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's conservation coordinator.

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If water restrictions are lifted, will the "temporary" increase in water rates be revisited as well?

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