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State's dry spell sparks wildfire fears, watering restrictions

Erin Richards and Don Behm

Jul. 3--It has been about a month since the Milwaukee area had a good thunderstorm, and the drier than normal conditions already are heightening concerns over residents' water usage and fireworks and outdoor burning activities likely to take place this week.

According to precipitation reports from Mitchell International Airport, Milwaukee was 0.16 inches below normal in June, but most of the rain fell early in the month, said J.J. Wood, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sullivan.

"Across southern Wisconsin, it's been dry for the most part since the 7th of June," Wood said. "It only takes two weeks of fairly dry weather for the grass to get pretty crunchy."

Residents in several suburban communities might have gotten a little happy with the garden hose as a result. New Berlin used about a million more gallons of water than normal Sunday, which prompted the city to order an indefinite lawn-sprinkling ban Monday for municipal water supply users.

New Berlin Mayor Jack Chiovarero said he was concerned that high water consumption could reduce reserves needed for firefighting, a risk he preferred to avoid considering the number of fuses that soon will be lighted around the city.

"This is the first complete ban we've had since 2001," Chiovarero said. "Normally, we have an even-odd day lawn sprinkling schedule."

Last week, Hartford similarly restricted lawn and garden watering. Hartford Water Utility customers whose homes have even-numbered addresses can water their lawns and gardens only on even-numbered days, and the same restriction applies for odd-numbered addresses. Other suburban communities have had similar restrictions for years.

For southeastern Wisconsin, at least, a break could be in sight: Meteorologist Wood predicted a 60% chance of thunderstorms today. Sodden sparklers are less likely for the Fourth of July -- Wednesday's chance of rain is 20%.

In about 14,000 acres of woodlands in northeastern Wisconsin, the warm and dry weather poses a different threat: wildfires. State forestry officials are asking residents and visitors to the area to halt use of fireworks and postpone outdoor burning, though the use of fireworks is prohibited in state parks and state and national forests in Wisconsin.

Fire danger is usually moderate across much of the state because of the growth of leaves, but dead pines and other trees left after the June 7 tornadoes and windstorms pose a significant hazard, said Mike Folgert, state forestry supervisor in Marinette and Oconto counties.

"In the last week, we've had more than a dozen wildfires in Marinette and Oconto counties," Folgert said Monday. "There's a lot of dead material out there."

One weekend wildfire started when a Marinette County landowner attempted to burn a pile of dry branches, and the fire got out of control and spread to the adjacent woods.

A fire last week that burned about 275 acres in the Peshtigo Harbor State Wildlife Area was extinguished on the surface, but it continues to smolder below ground in peat soil that accumulated from centuries of decaying vegetation,

Folgert said.

"We need some rain," he said. "And for our underground fire, we need several days of rain to soak the soil."

Use of fireworks was blamed for a few small wildfires over the weekend near Rhinelander in Oneida County, according to Phil Theiler, the Department of Natural Resources' area forestry leader in Forest, Langlade, Lincoln, Oneida and Vilas counties.

Farmers also are starting to worry about a lack of moisture for crops. Rainfall in some of the state's agricultural areas has been abnormally low, leaving corn and soybeans little moisture other than what's stored in the soil.

"We had some rain that carried us for a while, but that's starting to wane," said Jay Page, a farmer from Ripon and a Wisconsin Soybean Growers Association board member.

Corn planted in sandy soil has started to show signs of heat stress.

"I am not too concerned now, but give me another week," Page said. "Some rain would be a huge help at this time."

Much of Wisconsin's corn is in excellent shape, especially where the soil held rainfall that came early in the growing season.

But as the crop gets closer to pollination, it needs a lot of water.

Adequate rainfall is important in the next couple of weeks, said Mike Ballweg, a University of Wisconsin-Extension crops and soils agent in Sheboygan County.

"It is abnormally dry now. We are seeing crops suffering in the sense that they're wilting and stunted for lack of moisture," Ballweg said.

Rick Barrett and Lawrence Sussman of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

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