

Death toll reaches 15 as heat broils Dixie

The Associated Press

A sizzling heat wave that has claimed 15 lives and "just keeps getting hotter" marked time in the South today, locked in by a powerful front along the Mason-Dixon line, with 100-degree highs expected through the weekend.

Students left sweltering schools early on Tuesday, the elderly stayed at air-conditioned shelters, soybean and hay crops withered and thousands of chickens died in the heat.

"The culprit right now is a front that's wandering almost along the Mason-Dixon line, a barrier that won't allow cooler air in from the west," said Harry Gordon, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service Severe Storms Center in Kansas City, Mo.

"It just keeps getting hotter all the time," Gordon said today, adding that no relief is in sight at least until the weekend.

THE MERCURY soared over the century mark Tuesday in the Carolinas, Georgia, Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee, but the nation's hot spot was Gila Bend, Ariz., where the high was 107 degrees. In the South, Athens, Ga., suffered through 105-degree heat, the highest in the region.

Relief could come from rain spawned by the season's second tropical storm, Barry, now located about 200 miles east of Florida's Atlantic coast. But the slow-moving storm isn't expected to come within 65 miles of a major coastal city before Thursday or Friday, the weather service said.

Further west, torrential rains in Arkansas and Tennessee temporarily doused parched ground, but officials said lightning from the storm sparked a grass fire at Little Rock, Ark., a symptom of the summer's chronic dryness.

THE RAINS drove winds gusting to 60 mph through mid-Tennessee Tuesday, knocking out power to 12,000 customers. The storm's silver lining was a 15-degree drop in temperatures that peaked at 102 degrees in Jackson, Tenn. More 100-plus temperatures were forecast for today, however.

In Nashville, schools closed after only one full day of the new academic year when officials measured indoor temperatures at 98 degrees in some of the city's 1,214 non-

air conditioned classrooms.

Stores reported a run on fans and air conditioners.

"We've sold everything we can lay our hands on," said Betty Gibbons, an appliance clerk at a Nashville Sears store. "And we were about the only people in town that had anything left. We just can't keep anything in stock."

"It's terrible," said Meg Siegenthaler, a seventh-grader at West End Middle School in Nashville, of her sticky classroom. "You can concentrate, but it's hard. Even if there's a fan, not everyone is next to it."

CLASSES WERE also cut short or canceled in Alabama, Georgia and Texas.

A round-the-clock heat shelter was to open today in North Little Rock, Ark., with instructions to remain open until afternoon highs dip below 100 degrees.

In Alabama, where five people have died in the current heat spell, state Civil Defense Director Dan Turner opened 11 relief centers in Madison County on the Tennessee border.

North Alabama hasn't had a good rain since early July, said state Agriculture commissioner Albert McDonald, adding that crop damage could run into the millions. "There's not a green pasture up there. Without rain soon the soybean crop will be a total disaster."

Farm news was bad in Ohio, where the Ohio Crop Reporting Service said 90 percent of fields are short of moisture and Gov. Richard Celeste considered adding 27 more counties to his plea for federal disaster aid.

NEIGHBORING INDIANA has already been granted federal aid, which makes farmers eligible for emergency loans at 8 percent interest.

The heat fried some 900,000 chickens to death in Georgia, and dairy yields were down. Only 8 percent of Georgia's farm fields have adequate moisture, according to the Georgia Crop Reporting Service, with hay and soybean production decimated.

While about 200 people died in a July heat wave across the country, the temperature since Saturday has been blamed for five deaths in Alabama, two each in Georgia, Missouri, Tennessee and Kentucky and one each in North Carolina and Illinois.