

The State



Heat blamed in deaths of poultry, loss of cattle

North Carolina farmers have lost more than 175,000 chickens in the past two days to heat, an agriculture official said Thursday.

He said farmers are also being forced to slaughter cattle by the hundreds, because of the worst drought of the century.

"It's still hot as Hades," said Jim Devine, assistant director of public affairs in the N.C. Department of Agriculture. "The chickens are sitting around panting like dogs. The birds just can't stand the heat; they die of heat prostration."

A meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Raleigh said temperatures will stay in the 90s through the weekend, but a cold front pushing into the northeastern part of the state from Virginia could produce some thunderstorms Friday or Saturday.

"That front will help enhance the chance of some showers," said Richard Jones. "It's hard to say how much, though. I've been here since 1977 and it's the worst I've ever seen it."

Devine said the weather had dried out pastures, forcing producers to market their cattle.

"They are sitting down and doing some cost accounting," Devine added. "It costs them more to keep the cattle than to just get rid of them."

Devine said the chicken industry is suffering the most.

"All the poultry houses can do is

put fewer chickens in more houses," he said. "But then they have only so many houses."

Devine said about 30 counties have applied for federal aid through the Agriculture Stabilization Conservation Service. To become available for disaster status, they must suffer a 30 percent loss of a cash crop, Devine said.

The state's main cash crop, tobacco, can withstand dry conditions better than most crops, but even it is hurting, according to Devine.

"Everything is hurting to tell you the truth," he said.

Dr. Phil McKnelly, superintendent of state parks, said attendance figures have not been compiled yet, but indications are the past two weeks have been "super big" at parks, beaches and lakes.

Power companies are also being taxed. Duke Power company, which serves 1.4 million customers in North and South Carolina, said the reading at 5 p.m. Wednesday was 12,313 megawatts. The all-time mark of 12,687 megawatts was set in January 1985.

Carolina Power & Light Co. spokesman Wayne Ennis said Thursday that the power company broke records three consecutive days. He said the company doesn't anticipate any problems serving its 850,000 customers in North and South Carolina throughout the heat.