

Merciless heat wave keeps grip on South

From staff and wire reports

That searing summer sun shows no sign of letting up this weekend.

The official temperature in Wilmington Friday hit 100 — the first three-digit reading of the heat wave. It was not enough, however, to topple 1875's record of 102.

The weekend forecast is hot and hazy days and warm and muggy nights. Highs should be in the upper 90s and lows in the mid-70s.

The heat's human toll continues to rise, with 17 deaths in the South and the Midwest blamed on the relentless heat.

North Carolina's fourth heat-related death occurred Thursday night in Salisbury, where a 71-year-old woman died after spending the night in a public-housing apartment where temperatures shot to 110 degrees.

The woman's 69-year-old husband is hospitalized in fair condition after being treated for heat exhaustion and dehydration.

"These apartments are just about unbearable," said Paul Finger, a neighbor of the couple. "These people couldn't even afford a fan and they just sat in there, parched."

The temperature Friday was a sizzling 105 degrees at the Fayetteville Airport.

Records fell in at least three cities.

The 93-degree high at Cape Hatteras broke a 1942 record of 92. Also the 93-degree reading at the Asheville weather office broke their previous record of 90 set in 1977. The Raleigh-Durham Airport peaked at 99 degrees Friday afternoon to break the old record of 97 set in 1948 and tied in 1977.

It was 105 in Columbia, S.C., marking the 13th day in a row that city has seen the mercury in triple digits.

The National Weather Service in Raleigh says temperatures will continue to hover in the mid-90s to 100 degree range over the next five days, with the possible exception of Tuesday when a weak cold front may drop temperatures about 5 degrees.

Meanwhile, the heat accompanied by a drought is causing North Carolina farmers to dip into winter hay reserves to keep their herds alive.

"The cows are eating it as fast as it's growing," said Pittsboro farmer Joe Clark. "They don't have anything to eat now. In the springtime I depend on cutting the hay, and I've never failed before. It's not mismanagement. There's nothing we can do about the weather."

N.C. Agricultural Extension Service officials have compiled a directory for in-state and out-of-state hay supplies. Joe Phillips said the directory lists the owner's name, address, telephone number and type and quantity of hay he or she has for sale.

Farmers in the Midwest are offering hay to the South. Trucking and railroad companies are making arrangements to move it.

Although marijuana plants were seized in raids in New Hanover, Brunswick and Columbus counties this week, officials in Burke County canceled plans for a raid on marijuana growers because a preliminary check found that many plants were shriveled. "That tickles me to death," Burke County Sheriff's Lt. Ralph Johnson said Thursday. "I hate to see the drought, but it's a blessing for our eradication program."

Officials call it the state's worst drought in a century. Mandatory use restrictions imposed July 9 in Chapel Hill, Carrboro and much of surrounding Orange Coun-

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Staff photo by Dan Sears

Summer sizzler

Cold water, and plenty of it, cools Charles Greatorex (above) of G and S Painting after a morning spent on top of the UNCW water tower. How hot was it?

Well, the time/temperature sign on Oleander Drive said 104 (right), but the official National Weather Service high was 100.



Staff photo by Jamie Moncrest

Hot

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ty continued. Restaurants may only serve water only if customers order it. Car washing, lawn watering except on weekend mornings and the filling of swimming pools and fountains are prohibited. Violators face up to 30 days in jail or \$50 fines.

Last weekend, Wrightsville Beach had trouble with water demand exceeding the pumping capacity, causing the town to draw upon its reserves. Wrightsville Beach Town Manager Dale Ralston said Friday that the town has enough water, but still asks that residents "voluntarily refrain from watering."

"We're in pretty good shape now, but we're continuing to watch it," he said. Wrightsville Beach officials will assess the water situation again Monday, Ralston said.

Southeastern North Carolina is faring better than other parts of the South. A Columbus County woman said that may be because she has prayed for rain the past few months.

"I requested that the ministers have their congregations pray for rain," said Hilda Strickland. "The Bible tells us if we pray, God will answer our prayers."

Columbus County records show the average rainfall for the three-month period between May and July is close to 15 inches, and that the area already has gotten 16.71 inches.

Weather experts, however, have another explanation.

"It just appears that the fronts have hung up over those southern-most counties in the southern coastal plain," said Jim Brackett, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. "That area is often where the frontal zone stalls out."

"A lot of time the closer to the coast the more rain that falls," said State Climatologist David Epperson. "The southern coastal plain is the least stressed area of the state because they do get more rain."

Wilmington had 7.09 inches of rain in May, or about three inches above normal. He said rainfall in the rest of the southeastern part of the state has been about normal the past three months, while the rest of the state is far below normal.

"For the first four months of the year, we recorded the lowest amount of rainfall ever recorded at the station in 30 years," said George Clark, supervisor of the Border Belt Tobacco Research Station near Whiteville. "It started raining in May though ... and it's been raining ever since."