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Region ripples with welcome water Recent rains have been a boon to the whole area

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A quiet change is happening beneath the lush greenery of spring in the mountains, an unseen bounty for everyone who depends upon water.

After a drought that lasted more than four years, the underground streams that feed wells, creeks and rivers are rebounding faster than just about anyone expected they would.

"The newest data shows that the water table has risen more this year than (any time) in the past 17 years," said Dr. Tom Burnet, director of the Mills River Watershed Protection Project.

The boost in water supplies hidden under the ground will benefit thousands of residents who depend upon drinking-water wells, as well as farmers, water recreation businesses and towns.

Burnet keeps close tabs on water resources in his job promoting conservation in along the Mills River, drinking-water source for Hendersonville and Asheville. That includes monitoring the underground water table.

Groundwater is water that moves slowly underground. Part of the rain and snow that fall soaks down through the ground and collects in the groundwater table, especially during the winter and early spring when plants are dormant.

"The ground acts as a filter giving groundwater a high water quality," Burnet said. "Much of the groundwater in Western North Carolina eventually enters a stream."

When it hasn't rained for several days, groundwater welling up through springs provides most of the flow in creeks and rivers. Groundwater flow is reduced when large areas are paved over, Burnet said, and as more and more wells tap into underground supplies.

A drought that began five years ago left parts of Henderson County missing 60 inches of rainfall, more than the yearly average of 58 inches, according to Paul Speranza, local private forecaster. But since September, every month except January has brought near average or above average precipitation, according to records compiled on his web site, www.weatherequipment.com. The 9.08 inches of rain recorded in May was twice the monthly average of 4.53 inches.

All that rain has started to make a big difference in underground water supplies, Burnet said. For instance, groundwater monitored by the U.S. Geological Survey at Blantyre on the Transylvania/Henderson county line has risen 12 feet in the past seven months, higher than the historical median level.

"The groundwater level at Blantyre has not been this high since 1998 (the year the drought began)," Burnet said.

Hendersonville managed to avoid mandatory water restrictions during the long drought because of the strong flow of its water supply, the Mills River. But well drilling companies reported a booming business the past few summers as the water table dropped, drying up shallow wells and springs.

Merrill Well & Pump is among companies that hustled to drill wells the past few years. That business has slacked off this spring, said Gil Phillips, a field supervisor for the Penrose-based company.

"We still have work to do, but we do not have the backlog we have had in the past," he said.

When drilling wells, the company is hitting water at about the same depths it was during the drought, he said. But the "static level" to which groundwater rebounds has risen to levels considered normal.

"We feel confident it is coming back significantly," Phillips said.

With more and more areas being paved over and more people drawing water from underground, "it could get back into that (drought) situation if it were go dry again," he said. Phillips said he hopes that doesn't happen.

"We'd rather have the water and not have the work than the other way around," he said.

Transylvania and Henderson counties are the headwaters for the French Broad River, which flows through Buncombe and Madison counties downstream. The increase in precipitation and groundwater is benefiting canoe and rafting businesses up and down the river.

The extra water has transformed the river's whitewater section upstream of Hot Springs from a shallow rocky stream to a powerful, fun ride, raft guides say.

"It's a much bigger ride when the water level is like this," said Jason "Sprocket" Maes, 31, a veteran raft guide who works for Huck Finn Adventures of Hot Springs. "Where the waves are normally a foot or two tall, the waves are now 5 or 6 feet tall."

Even though the extra water makes for a great ride, frequent rain has discouraged some groups from going rafting. But those who book trips are finding rapids that rival those on rivers such as the Ocoee in East Tennessee, said Michael Hampton, co-owner of French Broad Rafting Expeditions.

"It's been great -- we've had the best spring ever," Hampton said. "People are seeing it (the river) now like they have never seen it before."