Anxiety builds over Duke relicensing



JESSICA NELMS | THE JOURNAL

Lake Keowee residents fear their shorelines will resemble this one along Lake Hartwell should Duke Energy carry out its proposal to lower Keowee's levels to an average of 795 feet 96 percent of the time.

BY MIKE EADS
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Duke Energy is just months away from submitting its proposal for a new, multi-decade license to run the Keowee/Toxaway hydroelectric facility, and a growing group of lake residents are very worried.

The fear stems from a proposal being discussed by Duke and several local, state and federal stakeholders, as well as groups such as Friends of Lake Keowee Society (FOLKS), which would drop the lake levels. The parties are discussing a "trial balloon" proposal to submit late next spring to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).

Duke wants to reconfigure its Oconee Nuclear Station to require less water for its three nuclear reactors. Company officials insist the lake level would be at 795 feet above sea level at least 96 percent of the time.

Jen Huff, Duke's project manager for the re-licensing, told an audience of FOLKS members last month that the company would raise Lake Keowee's minimum level from 775 feet to 790 feet and probably realize levels of 795 feet or better 96 percent of the time.

"Most of the time, under the trial balloon, Lake Keowee would be higher than under the current agreement," Huff said.

Huff added, however, that the company, which owns the water in Lake Keowee and the adjacent Lake Jocassee, is obliged to release water downstream to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reservoirs further down the Savannah River basin, especially during times of drought.

"I know we all think there's plenty of water, but there's not," she said.

Duke is also willing to allow dock owners to follow the water line with their docks, just as homeowners around drought-impacted Lake Hartwell are forced to do.

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A growing group of Keowee residents outside the negotiations don't like what they've been seeing and hearing so far (negotiation updates can be found at www.duke-energy.com/lakes/keowee-toxaway-relicensing.asp).

Nearly 1,000 of them have signed petitions calling on Duke to scrap the proposal, which they believe will shrink the lake levels enough to affect their property values. One of the petition organizers told the Oconee County Council last month that homeowners bought their properties with the "perception" that Lake Keowee's levels would always be constant.

"We don't think 100 percent of those compromises should come off the backs of Oconee County and Pickens County residents," said Newton Brightwell, who went on to claim that half of the docks around the lake could wind up sitting on mud flats, thus dropping property values and property tax collections for the county.

Brightwell's colleague, Doug Barker, also appeared before the council and claimed Duke is fudging the potential economic impact of their plans for the lake.

Barker said Duke claims "the economic impact of lowering the lake another 5 feet is negligible," said Barker, alleging that Duke included eight Upstate counties in its impact study to mitigate the economic effect it would have on Oconee and Pickens counties.

David Wyman, associate director of the Spiro Institute at Clemson University, agrees with Barker. Wyman owns land on Keowee and based his doctorate work on the real estate development around the lake.

"This will have a substantial impact on pricing around Lake Keowee," Wyman said. "I can't tell yet if this impact will be 10 percent or 40 percent."

Wyman said there has been "an implied contract (between Duke and homeowners) that there would be consistent water levels." Now, with the possibility of the levels dropping, "you've introduced an element of uncertainty to property values," Wyman asserted.

Chuck Smith is FOLKS representative in the stakeholder talks with Duke. He understands his neighbors' concerns, but cautions that it is still somewhat early in the game.

"We're just six weeks into (discussing the lake levels)," Smith said. "What we don't know is where does FERC, (Southeastern Power Association – which regulates hydroelectric facilities) and the Corps stand."

Many of the Lake Keowee residents fear the lake becoming another Lake Hartwell. That Corps-operated reservoir has been subject to record low levels over the last several years of drought – and property values have suffered for it.

"During that first bad drought (2008-09), people got upset because you couldn't sell a house on the lake. You couldn't give a house away and it's almost to that point now," according to Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association.

"There was a large amount of money lost during last drought because tourism was not holding its own," Burnham said. "It was a serious hit on people living around the lake."

Hartwell is more susceptible to drought because it sits near the top of the Corps-operated Savannah River Basin. Freshwater levels down the river are watched closely to prevent saltwater from washing too far up the basin. Duke is also obliged to release water downstream.

"We think they should share some of the pain," Burnham said. "It's not going to help us that much, but we think they should share some of the pain."

Residents will get to hear more about the Keowee/Toxaway relicensing process when Duke Energy representatives will brief the Oconee County Council at 6 p.m. Thursday in the council chambers, 415 S. Pine St. in Walhalla.

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