

Barrett asks corps to maintain lower lake water releases

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U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett has asked the Army Corps of Engineers to maintain reduced releases from Upstate lakes beyond Jan. 31, and a corps spokesman said the agency wants to do so.

Following up on a formal request to keep releases from lakes Hartwell and Thurmond at 3,100 cubic feet per second for as long as possible, Barrett met this week with Gen. Joseph Schroedel, commander of the corps' South Atlantic Division.

"I appreciate the complexities of managing our lakes and rivers, especially during drought conditions, and I talked with the general about those concerns," Barrett said. "There have to be common-sense solutions that can be implemented to reduce the overall effects of a drought on our lakes."

Lake Hartwell, which reached a record 22-foot low level on Dec. 9, was 645.08 feet above mean sea level Thursday, according to corps data — still nearly 15 feet below full pool.

Barrett said he wants to find "better solutions for any future drought situa-

tions" and specifically asked Schroedel what obstacles remain and what lessons have been learned.

Billy Birdwell, a corps spokesman present at the meeting, said the corps wants to maintain the reduction for a longer time.

"We are looking at if there will be an ability to go beyond Feb. 28. Right now we are looking at whether it can be extended to Feb. 28 because of the impact to the shortnose sturgeon," Birdwell said.

The corps granted a reduction from 3,600 cfs only through January due to concern from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service about the impact of reduced releases on spawning grounds of the shortnose sturgeon, an endangered species.

The corps and the Nature Conservancy are conducting a study of the impact. The Fisheries Service will make the decision, Birdwell said.

Extending the reduction beyond February would require another environmental assessment that includes a 30-day public comment period and would have to be initiated by a request from the states, because they own the water, Birdwell said.