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Boaters

s return to lakes

Water level higher, but drought's not over yet

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CLEMSON — Two months ago, David Freeman, owner of Portman Marina, couldn't operate his gas dock. Lake Hartwell was so low he had to move it and store it in a deeper cove. Boats were leaving the 500-slip marina as the lake dried up. Traffic in the two restaurants was slow.

Projections put Lake Hartwell 18 feet low for the summer. Freeman worried about making payroll.



PAUL BROWN

This gauge shows Hartwell at 5 feet below full pool last week

Now, Hartwell is less than five feet below full pool, back to a level last seen in the summer of 2007. It's "business as usual," even in a recession, Freeman said.

Freeman said people are staying home and enjoying themselves on the lake in lieu of vacations because of the economy. All because the lake is back, he said.

Real estate activity on the lake also is increasing with lake levels, said Mike Gray, broker at Hartwell Lake Properties. The economy certainly is a factor in real estate sales, but the state of the waterfront is critical as well.

"The economy on our lake suffers terribly when the lake goes down," Gray said.

Mike Massey, chairman of the 2,000-member Lake Hartwell Association's South Carolina Legislative Committee, recently took his family for a pontoon ride on his father's 90th birthday. The dramatic change in lake levels and activity gave him added reason for celebration.

"Some of the larger boats were back in their docks. It was very pleasing to see everything looking like it was going back to normal," Massey said.

"The big concern is what do you do now," Massey said. "The lake is up, how do you keep it up?"

The Lake Hartwell Association is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to encourage more flexible management of the lakes and also is supporting legislative efforts to create a comprehensive water plan and basin management councils for the state.

A new organization, Lake Hartwell 660 Coalition, also is calling for changes to the Corps' lake management plan to help prevent the kind of drop in the water level seen this past year.

The name of the 660 Coalition refers to Hartwell's full pool level of 660 feet above mean sea level. The group has scheduled an organizational meeting Saturday at 10 a.m. at the Hart County High School in Hartwell, Ga.

"If Lake Hartwell were at full pool today, it would be no less vulnerable to the next dry weather cycle or lake level management philosophy," said Gray, one of the organizers of the 660 group. "Any plan update must reflect lessons learned from the current drought situation."

Lake levels rose in Hartwell as a result of significant rain and Corps action to reduce releases and then stop releases from Hartwell. Releases resumed last week.

Billy Birdwell, a Corps spokesman, said discharges resumed when water temperature rose to a point that triggers large mouth bass spawning. The goal is to try to hold all three Upstate Corps lakes as steady as possible and avoid any big drops that would expose the fish eggs.

Because downstream needs were being met from Thurmond while water was being retained in Hartwell, Thurmond needs more water to meet that goal, Birdwell said.

"A good spawning season 2009 means a good fishing season in 2011," Birdwell said.

While grassroots groups are calling for more flexible lake management practices, Birdwell said the Corps is taking action in