Corps' handling of lake wins public's praise

Homeowners say setting levels based on drought helped Hartwell rebound

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Lake Hartwell was 18 inches below full pond last Thursday when the Lake Hartwell Association held its annual meeting, compared to 18 feet below full at the time of last year's gathering.

Association President Herb Burnham noted the difference when he addressed the gathering of more than 200 people at the Anderson Civic Center, saying that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' use of adaptive management worked.

Adaptive management — altering downstream flow from the corps' Upstate lakes depending on current conditions rather than rigid numbers — is a policy change the association has urged the corps to adopt.

Brig. Gen. Todd Semonite, new commander of the corps' South Atlantic Division, which includes the Savannah River Basin, said he's a believer — within limits.

"I understand clearly the facts of what happened in the lake," Semonite told the Pickens County News in an interview before speaking to the association. "We clearly are concerned about lake levels and monitor them daily."

There's "no silver bullet" to solve lake-level problems in severe drought, Semonite said. Adaptive management is a way to "optimize all the variables" that the corps is charged by Congress to keep in balance on the lake.

Water planning was the focus of the meeting. Two bills supported by the association will be debated in the Statehouse in the next session.

One is a permitting bill to regulate how much water can be drawn from lakes and rivers in the state. The other would create a statewide comprehensive water plan.