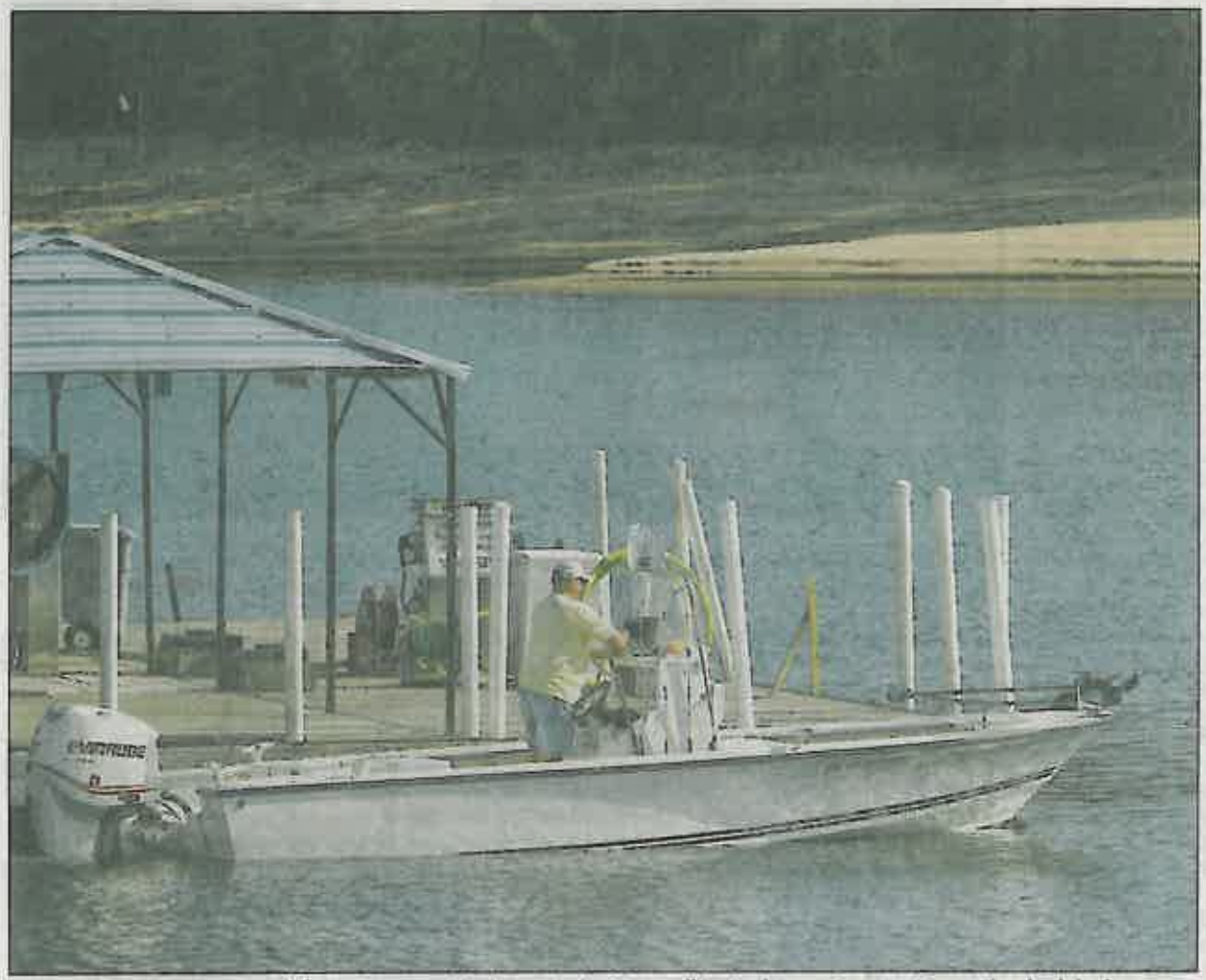
Driest 30-year period on record



A boater prepares to cast off from Portman Marina on Lake Hartwell in Anderson County. Currently, the lake is more than eight feet below full pond. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

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New efforts launched to safeguard water sources

Growing population, less rain, scarce funding drive area lakes' problems

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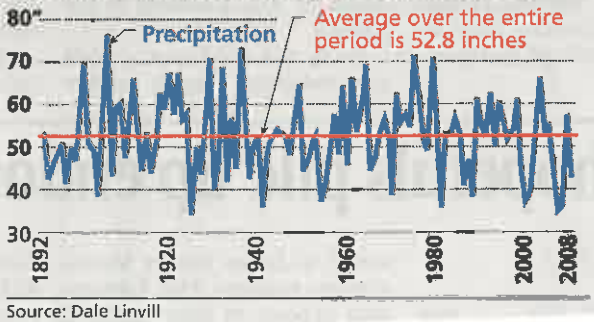
The new year will bring new efforts to confront challenges to the Upstate's water sources threatened by growth and drought.

Efforts are underway in the Legislature to win money for a study that could change the rules the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers uses to manage water levels in Lake Hartwell.

And the state's con-

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Clemson annual precipitation



Source: Dale Linvill

WATER

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gressmen recently met with the corps about getting some of the $600 million from electricity sales generated by Upstate dams to help manage the region's water basin.

Water planning has long been an issue "out West," while the Southeast "always had plentiful water," said Herb Burnham, a member of the Lake Hartwell Association.

After a drought in the early 1950s, rain was plentiful from the mid-1950s through the 1960s, when Lake Hartwell was built, said Dale Linvill, a retired Clemson University agricultural meteorologist who is studying weather patterns since the late 1800s to see how past droughts before the reservoir was built might have affected it.

Now years of growing population and demand for water and a decade peppered with recurring drought have taken a toll on the big pond that separates Upstate South Carolina and northeastern Georgia, and the Savannah River that flows through it from the mountains to the coast.

The past three decades have been the driest 30-year period since Clemson started keeping records in 1892, Linvill said.

The corps follows a prescribed lake management plan and has taken heat from Upstate residents who want to keep lakes from dropping in drought and from Lowcountry residents concerned about getting water in hot, dry years.

Currently, Lake Hartwell is more than eight feet below full pond.

The corps, under its management plan, has cut back releases from the lakes through the Thurmond Dam to the lowest allowed at the current lake level, said Aaron Wahus, park operations manger at Thurmond Lake.

Patrick Moore, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said predictions call for rainfall to be near normal for the rest of the winter.

It's the memory of 2008, when Hartwell fell to an historic 22-foot low, exposing old roadbeds and leaving docks and boat ramps high and dry, that drives Burnham and others to call for change in lake management to prevent a recurrence.

South Carolina is the reason a $1 million, second phase of the comprehensive study hasn't started. The study is needed before change can be enacted. The corps was given $500,000 in long-sought federal money more than a year ago, and Georgia is contributing its $250,000 share.

The Nature Conservancy agreed to fund the state's share so the study can begin. However, some would prefer an "unbiased study" funded by the state and not an outside organization, said state Rep. Don Bowen, R-Townville.

State revenues have improved somewhat, so Bowen recently made a formal request for $250,000.

State Rep. Brian White, R-Anderson, said he agrees and supports the request. White chairs the House Ways and Means Committee, and his district, like Bowen's, includes parts of Lake Hartwell.

U.S. 3rd District Rep. Jeff Duncan, a Laurens County Republican, is lending his support and spoke to White about the need on a recent duck hunting trip. Duncan's district includes the Upstate corps' lakes.

Duncan and Bowen recently met with U.S. Sens. Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint and Corps officials to discuss bringing some of the electricity revenue back to the states for basin management.

"Money in a tight economy is hard to come by, especially when you live in a reasonably poor state," Bowen said.

"The states own the water, and they receive no direct payments for its use. We know it will take a federal action to do so."

Bowen said he also will continue this year to push for passage of a statewide water-management plan.

The legislation, supported by the Lake Hartwell Association, would create plans and oversight for each basin in the state.