

Drought, gas prices a double whammy for boaters

By Jennifer Crossley Howard

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ANDERSON — A dry winter has left Hartwell Lake thirsting for water, expanding an already wide red-clay shoreline, and the pre-summer forecast predicts more parched conditions.

The chance that rainfall will improve significantly by Memorial Day is slim.

For boaters, the summer outlook has two downers: The lake has less water for their boats and gas prices mean it is costly to run them.

The Climate Prediction Center is forecasting above-normal temperatures for the rest of April, May and June. There is a fair chance for rain, said National Weather Service meteorologist Chris Horne, but at this point the Upstate needs a hurricane-like weather pattern to make up its rainfall deficit.

Anderson's April rainfall was 0.65 of an inch as of Tuesday, about an inch below normal.

Horne said the last few summers have left no rainfall surpluses.

"That seems to be the biggest concern pretty much every summer," he said.

If the above-normal-temperature trend continues into the hottest summer months, this summer could be miserable. Last July and August highs topped 100 degrees.

Hartwell Lake's depth in mid-spring is already low, said George Bramlette, Hartwell Lake and Dam Project manager.

"It looks like we should be down around 650.80 feet around June 16, roughly based on in-flows," he said. On Tuesday, Lake Hartwell stood 652.42 feet above sea level, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Lake Jocassee stood 24 feet below full pool, Duke Energy charts showed, and Lake Keowee stood 4 feet below full pool.

Hartwell Lake's 962 miles of receding red-clay shoreline is a symptom of a third-level severe drought that has hit Anderson, Oconee, Pickens, Abbeville, McCormick and Edgefield counties.

The lack of rain has left Hartwell Lake's Anderson County swimming areas bare stretches of cracked earth.

"We're in the same position right now where they're all dry," said Zach Harkness, chief park ranger at the lake. "The little bit of rain we are getting right now we aren't getting a whole lot of runoff because the ground is so dry it's soaking it up."

Swimming areas are supposed to be 6 feet deep when the lake is at a full-pool level of 660 feet. A pier at Portman Marina sloped over dry, cracked earth Tuesday, and the shore of the lake near S.C. 24 left buoys exposed.

Things aren't much better in Oconee County.

Doug Young lives in the lake front community Chickasaw Point near Westminster. He said that this spring is drier than others he's observed since moving there in 2003.

When the lake goes down, the community's beach turns muddy and no one wants to visit it, he said.

"It makes it harder for us to use the lake, it affects real estate," Young said. "People come down and see all this red clay around the shoreline. It causes us some problems."

But Young said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which coordinates Hartwell Lake's water management, is doing a good job watching Hartwell Dam's outflow. He said he is pleased that the outflow has been reduced to 2,000 and 3,000 cubic feet per day.

"The Corps of Engineers is being much more proactive than in the past as far as keeping the lake up," Young said.

He's not sure how many boaters to expect on the water as the weather warms, but he will be monitoring the time his bass boat runs. Even though gas prices in Anderson dropped almost 5 cents over the past week to \$3.65 a gallon, it's still expensive for boaters. And fuel goes farther on the road than on the water.

"If I'm skiing behind my boat it burns six gallons an hour," Young said. "It costs \$40 an hour to water ski."

An oil refinery fire on the West Coast and swinging spot prices are producing unpredictable fluctuations at the pump.

"The only thing I remain sure of with gasoline prices is that things will remain quite volatile the next four to six weeks," said Patrick DeHaan, senior petroleum analyst at GasBuddy.com.

While gas prices and lake levels remain unstable, Harkness is hoping for a hard rain. In December 2008, Hartwell Lake fell 23 feet below full pool, but by the next May it had risen to full pool.

"We've seen the lake much lower than this and fill back up," he said.

