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Drought remains despite recent rain

Hartwell still low with region's dry months ahead

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CLEMSON — Rain expected to continue at least through today hasn't washed away calls for a better way to protect lake levels and associated water supply, property value and economic concerns.

Rainfall amounts since showers started Tuesday varied across the Upstate. Just over an inch has fallen at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, and more than four inches has fallen in the Travelers Rest area, according to the National Weather Service.

Lake Hartwell remained more than six feet below full pool, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers data shows.



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / S

People stand above Reedy River Falls on Sunday as the recent rain has increased th volume of water flowing over the falls.

"The handwriting is already on the wall," said Dennis Chastain, a Pickens County resident on the state Drought Response Committee, who wants a better "early warning system" to start water conservation resources earlier.

Less than three months after spring rains ended three years of drought, 22 South Carolina counties including the entire Upstate are back in incipient, or the earliest drought status.

Hope Mizzell, the sta climatologist, was pois last week to call a droug committee meeting to co sider upgrading to mod ate drought. The rai

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have "at least temporarily postponed the need to consider moving to higher levels," she said, but "as we get closer to October and November, those tend to be our driest months."

Long-range forecasts bear that trend out for this fall, she said.

A tropical storm could fill the lakes, but more sustained rains are needed to replenish the ground water, said Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System that draws water from Lake Hartwell and a member of the state Drought Response Committee.

Predicted drier weather "is probably going to leave us 10 feet down by Thanksgiving," Willett said.

Depleted groundwater also concerns Mizzell. This recent rain was only a drop in a fairly empty bucket.

Groundwater is like a checking account. "You want a surplus" for the hard times, not just enough to get by. "That's why it's been so easy to slip back in drought," Mizzell said.

Although incipient drought requires no action, Mizzell encourages conservation beyond individual efforts to use water wisely at home and work.

Water systems can review their drought plans and implement earlier watch stages and conservation measures, and lawmakers can enact surface-water withdrawal legislation — something state agencies, industry and water systems have been unable to agree on, she said.

"We have been through 10 years of drought, and we still cannot come to agreement on surface-water withdrawal legislation. That, to me, continues the need to be at the forefront over anything else, especially given the fact that we all are so aware of the impact of drought and that we can run out of water," Mizzell said.

Water regulations need to be centralized under one agency rather than multiple agencies, and coordination is needed between the state's four watersheds, said State Rep. Don Bowen, R-Anderson, who, along with state Sen. Kevin Bryant, R-Anderson, has introduced water legislation.

"Working together we can resolve this issue. We want to bring everyone to the table and get it right," Bowen said.

Lake Hartwell "is worth $200 million" to local communities in terms of in economic gain and jobs, said Bowen, who is working with economic and water experts to determine an optimum "sweet level" for Hartwell to function as an economic engine.

Larry Dyck, a board member of the Lake Hartwell Association, said, "It's worth more than $200 million to us." The association of more than 2,000 member families supports water legislation and has called for the Corps of Engineers to maintain higher lake levels and change its management policies regarding downstream discharge to better adapt to current conditions.

The Corps has reduced downstream discharge through the Thurmond Dam from its three Upstate lakes — Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond — than called for in its current plan and is redoing its drought plan based on lessons learned from the past three years of drought, said Col. Edward J. Kertis, Savannah District commander for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"The three-year drought gave some incredible data points. We need to come out with a better drought plan and we're on it," Kertis said.

Lake Hartwell reached a record low of more than 22 feet below full pool in December.

The Corps is keeping releases from the three-lake system at 200 cubic feet per second below the published plan, said Billy Birdwell, a Corps spokesman. Under current conditions, the plan allows release of 3,800 cubic feet per second. The Corps is keeping releases below 3,600, he said.

An environmental assessment that could lower flow from the three-lake system for late fall and winter is nearing completion, Birdwell said. If approved and warranted, discharge could drop to 3,100 as early as Nov. 1.

Lake Hartwell was 15 feet below full pool, at 645.5 feet above mean sea level in mid-September last year. The lake was 653.72 feet above mean sea level Friday.

It appears that the Corps is "responding further into the future, which would give me hope they are trying to keep more water up here," Willett said.

Water usage by the customers of the regional system's 14 water providers in Anderson and Pickens counties averages 10-12 percent below last year's demand, Willett said. There was no bounce-back when last winter's restrictions were lifted. The lower demand may be driven by increased conservation awareness or the economy – people cutting back on bills, Willett said.

Willett said he hears similar results from other water providers across the Upstate. While watching numbers, he has no plans to ask customers for more.

"I am hesitant to try to call for conservation when we have something going on that is more powerful than what we would ask for," Willett said.

Rains last spring "bought us a year" said Willett, who last fall anticipated the possibility of having to extend the systems intakes to reach Hartwell's receding water — doable but expensive. "Now do we return to normal or are we continuing the drought cycle?"