DUKE DISPUTES DROUGHT'S END

Decision raises larger questions about future water usage

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A government-sanctioned group tasked by state law to assess drought conditions in South Carolina has declared the entire state to be drought-free — but the panel's decision hasn't come without objection.

The Upstate's chief energy provider is questioning the declaration, insisting that the region is still in a state of drought and that the dissonance created by a statewide lifting of the status is confusing to water users.

The lake levels are up, but likely won't reach full pool despite the winter and spring rains that prompted the state Department of Natural Resource's drought response committee to lift the drought, private and government analysts say.

However, members of the drought panel say they stand by the decision, pointing to an overwhelming amount of data that shows streams are healthy, groundwater is plentiful and soil moisture has given farmers a firm foundation for growing.

The theater of public perception is at play, the struggle to balance credibility with inconvenient realities.

The economic impacts of a drought are immeasurable, affecting everything

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from how electricity is generated, when lawns can be irrigated and whether the state can maintain recreation on lakes that can bring millions of dollars to the Upstate's economy.

What is more certain is that deciding whether a drought exists is complex and has different — and sometimes competing — interests.

And the stakes will only increase as the region grows economically.

The growth, coupled with climate change, promises less certainty in the future, environmental and industry experts say.

And the greatest challenge, they say, is convincing the public that, despite the comfort that a contested drought-free declaration brings, South Carolina must see the opportunity to plan for the inevitable while not under a state of duress.

Duke Energy objects

Last week, the state's drought response committee cited a number of factors in lifting South Carolina out of drought, including rainfall, lake levels, stream flows, soil moisture, local water usage and near-term forecasts for rain.

The winter brought steady rainfall. The Upstate in particular saw rain totals in December as much as 150 percent above normal, followed by January totals reaching up to four times more than normal rainfall for the month, said state climatologist Hope Mizzell, who coordinates the state's drought response.

The drought is an elusive phenomenon to gauge, Mizzell said. For instance, the rain fell at the right time, when evaporation associated with warmer weather wasn't in play.

"If this had happened in the summer," she said, "this same rainfall wouldn't have pulled us out of drought."

In the committee's deliberations, Duke Energy — which operates hydroelectricity stations on man-made lakes Keowee and Jocassee and depends on water to cool its three reactors at the Oconee Nuclear Station — presented its case not to lift the entire state out of drought.

Following the decision, Duke expressed its disagreement, company spokeswoman Erin Culbert said.

The presence of a drought and the ability to use hydroelectricity doesn't factor into Duke's impending request before state regulators to raise power rates for customers, Culbert said.

The rate increase is tied to other factors, she said, including investment in "new, cleaner power plants, improvements to our vegetation management program and federally mandated nuclear power plant safety and cyber security enhancements."

The statewide decision "might be confusing to water users" in the upper portion of the Savannah River Basin, Culbert said.

The basin is where Keowee and Jocassee, along with Lake Hartwell, which is run by the Army Corps of Engineers, must delicately balance lake levels with concerns over the Upstate's drinking water, power production, recreation use and the environmental impact that comes with damming rivers.

At the meeting, Duke suggested a status of "incipient drought" for the Keowee-Toxaway power-producing area along Keowee and Jocassee, the lowest level of drought.

The Keowee-Toxaway lake level storage areas, along with the Catawba area where Duke also provides power in South Carolina, saw improvement since December, Duke said.

However, the company said its forecast calls for below-normal rainfall into September before it shifts to above-normal, and without significant rainfall greater than the weekly average and with evaporation coming into play as warmer temperatures set in, lake levels aren't likely to improve.

"Duke Energy is most focused on the river basins where we operate reservoirs, and those local conditions can vary," Culbert said. "Neighbors on Lake Keowee are still limited to

irrigating lawns on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and Lake Jocassee has improved from recent rainfall but is still 14 feet below full pond."

Keowee currently is about one foot below its full pond.

Army Corps view

The energy company isn't the only entity that is still operating under a drought status.

The Army Corps of Engineers plans to release water from Hartwell to bring up levels at Lake Thurmond below, where drought conditions persist, spokesman Billy Birdwell said.

The corps manages the lakes releasing water into the Savannah River to balance the environment downstream and generate hydroelectricity that it sells to utilities. The lakes were originally created in the middle of the 20th century to provide flood control and evolved in use as the Southeast's economy grew.

"We are still in drought operations on the reservoirs even though there might not be an official drought for the state," Birdwell said. "If any one of the reservoirs are in a drought condition, all of them are. We treat them all as one."

Thurmond's level currently is about 5.5 feet below normal, in its lowest level of drought status but not far from reaching a second level, he said.

The corps expects lake levels to rise over the next 10 weeks, then even out as rain patterns change, evaporation increases and plants suck more water from the reservoirs.

The South Carolina Drought Response Act, enacted in 2000, formed the drought response committee and set out its duties.

The response team is made up of state agencies — such as Emergency Management, Agriculture, Health and Environmental Control, Forestry, and Natural Resources — and regional committees, approved by the governor, made up of interests including local governments, commissions and special service districts, private water suppliers, agriculture, industry, domestic users, councils of government and power producers.

The Department of Natural Resources is empowered to enforce water management restrictions but must consult the drought response committee after conferring with regional committees.

The act allows for an appeals process before an administrative law judge if an entity objects to a declaration by the committee.

Duke has disputed the drought-free designation but hasn't appealed, Mizzell said.

"We obviously have a situation where Duke disagrees," she said. "They've expressed some concern to us, and we've had some dialogue with them over this. I wouldn't say it's a level of major contention."

One Upstate representative on the committee, naturalist Dennis Chastain of Pickens County, said that the committee "takes what we do very seriously."

"We are always very aware that these drought designations have real-world implications, that they really do impact people's livelihood and daily lives," Chastain said.

"When we get into a severe or extreme drought situation, farmers need to know if they need to start looking for hay or drinking water for their livestock, water providers need to know if they need to start restricting water usage, and on and on."

The decision was based on a mountain of data pointing to an end to the drought, Chastain said.

Lake levels are below full pond, but save for Jocassee, where levels are an outlier compared to neighboring lakes, the reservoirs overall have recovered, he said.

Broader issues

State Rep. Don Bowen, an Anderson Republican who represents the area of Lake Hartwell where lakefront property owners have watched levels rise and fall dramatically, fears that the declaration of a drought sometimes obscures the need to address larger water issues.

If there's a problem, he said, blame it on the drought.

"I think sometimes they do take advantage of that situation," Bowen said. "Just to say we have a drought and it's tough, that kind of answer is not acceptable any more."

Of chief concern, he said, is the economic detriment that low lake levels have on the economy surrounding Lake Hartwell.

The lake attracted a $23 million international fishing competition in 2008, but a follow-up event that would have brought $15 million into the economy failed because levels were too low for boats to be put in, he said.

Bowen has organized a group of legislators and officials from both South Carolina and Georgia to try to convince the federal government to alter how it reduces lake levels.

The economic and recreational impact must be granted more weight, and the electricity production should be shifted from hydro to newer, low-cost natural gas, he said.

Bowen said more needs to be done to recognize a drought before the state finds itself in the middle of one.

John Saylor, a Clemson University mechanical engineering professor who focuses on water issues, said that higher rainfall now doesn't diminish the need for planning.

"What we know is true is that our population is growing and our economy is growing, and as a result, our water consumption is growing," Saylor said. "While that may not cause a problem this year or next year, at some point in the future the water we have available to us will not satisfy the needs we have."

In the West, communities have had to implement costly water-saving measures — but they are made more costly because they were decisions made under duress, Saylor said.

"They do it because they have to do it," he said. "If you try things like that in a rush, it's going to cost more money."

The Greenville Water System is pushing for forward-looking actions, CEO David Bereksin said.

"What is important to keep in mind is that climate change is here to stay, and we have to stay vigilant and prepared for when the drought comes back," Bereksin said.