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Duke Energy agreement looks at changes to Lake Keowee drought level

By Ray Chandler

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SALEM —Duke Energy officials say new plans for Lake Keowee's minimum drought lake levels should have minimum effect on the lake.

Jenn Huff, Duke Energy's project manager for the relicensing of the Keowee-Toxaway hydroelectric project, told about 250 mostly lakefront property owners Thursday that models projected that Lake Keowee would only be subjected to the new minimum 4 percent of the time, during Stage 4 drought conditions. The lake is now at Stage 2 drought status.

The proposed new minimum level is 790 feet above mean sea level, five feet lower than the current minimum level for Lake Keowee of 795 feet above mean sea level. Full pool for the lake is 800 feet above mean sea level.

The minimum level is maintained for the operation of the Oconee Station nuclear power plant on the lake that furnishes the facility's cooling water. In general, Huff said, Duke Energy wants to increase the safe operating level range of the plant by modifying the water intake.

Property owners on Thursday expressed concerns that lowered lake levels would decrease the values of their lakefront homes. Residents of some lakeside subdivisions are organizing petitions in hopes of persuading Duke Energy to drop that provision from the draft relicensing agreement.

According to the models, 96.3 percent of the time, the lake levels will be at 795 feet above mean sea level or over, according to Huff.

"If not in drought conditions, we still won't be able to go below 795 feet without violating our (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) license," Huff assured the property owners. "We really don't want to do that."

The final relicensing agreement will be part of Duke Energy's relicensing application for the Keowee-Toxaway project, which must be filed with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission by August 2014. The project was granted a 50-year license in 1966. The relicensing process has been under way since 2009, with Duke Energy seeking the input of stakeholders, including local governments, conservation groups, property owners and others.

Among other provisions of the agreement, Huff said, is that surveys have found no rare, threatened or endangered fish populations to be protected and that the lake contained adequate levels of dissolved oxygen.

Huff said surveys had found that erosion was taking two to three inches of shoreline a year, but the major causes were boat waves and wind-driven waves.

A new shoreline management plan to be part of the agreement will also mean lakefront property owners with docks will have to remove unencapsulated foam from their docks within two years of the new license, Huff said, because pieces breaking off and floating in the lake are now a problem.

New leases will also be approved for 10 public access areas and programs will be put in place to promote safe boating and water safety.

The final agreement is expected to be finished and signed by November 2013.



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