Duke addresses Keowee-Toxaway rumors

BY MIKE EADS
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WALHALLA — A Duke Energy executive repeatedly reassured the Oconee County Council and 50 or so Lake Keowee residents Thursday night that the company has no intention of running down lake levels or wrecking property values.

Jeff Lineberger oversees Duke's bid for a new license to operate its Keowee-Toxaway hydroelectric project. He briefed residents and council members on talks under way to formulate an operating agreement for Keowee-Toxaway with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Oconee and Pickens counties, as well as several state and federal agencies and local citizens groups, have representatives negotiating with Lineberger and his staff to come up with a tentative agreement by May 2013.

Lineberger emphasized that Duke needs a high water level in Lake Keowee to run its Oconee Nuclear Station and the hydroelectric facility.

Oconee County accounts for "one-seventh of our generating capacity in the Carolinas," according to Lineberger. "We can't do without the water in the Keowee-Toxaway project."

Lineberger also noted that Duke sells to Seneca's and Greenville's local water utilities and loses water to evaporation every day, especially during drought periods.

"People need to have water and they need to have electricity and (Keowee-Toxaway) provides that for the Upstate," he added.

Several hundred Keowee resident have signed petitions calling on Duke to abandon its plans to change how it manages lake levels. Lineberger tackled that head on, saying those residents are operating under a misconception.

"I think this is something people are missing: We are raising the floor on Lake Keowee absolutely and significantly," Lineberger said.

Duke is currently obligated by an agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to run the lake down as low as 775 feet (from the full pool level of 800 feet) in times of severe drought. The Corps requires water from Duke to maintain the integrity of the Savannah River Basin, which includes Lake Hartwell.

The company wants to raise that minimum to 790 feet under a plan it says would keep Lake Keowee at or above 795 feet over 90 percent of the time and probably above 793 feet 99.6 percent of the time.

"The range between 800 to 795 feet would be the normal operating range we would agree to stay within (as long as no drought restrictions were in place)," Lineberger told Council member Paul Corbeil.

Council member Wayne McCall said he has friends who work at the nuclear station who told him warmer water temperatures adversely affect its operation. Higher lake levels mean more water to diffuse the heat.

"So it's not to your advantage at all to be dumping water?" he asked Lineberger, who agreed.

Duke maintains a website with updates on the relicensing process: www.duke-energy.com/lakes/keowee-toxaway-relicensing.asp. Friends of Lake Keowee Society has its own site tracking the process: www.keoweefolks.org/FOLKS/Duke_KT_Relicensing.html.

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