Duke improves area's drought

Energy supplier says area still not 'normal'

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Duke Energy has improved the drought status in the region of its man-made lakes following recent heavy rains, but the company stopped short of joining state and federal government in declaring the area drought-free.

The Upstate's chief energy provider announced the decision Friday, two weeks after it objected to a declaration by South Carolina's drought response committee that the entire state is free from drought.

Earlier this week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lifted its drought status for Lake Hartwell after record amounts of rain fell last weekend.

Upstream from Hartwell, Duke manages lakes Jocassee and Keowee, which are used to produce hyrdroelectricity and cooling for the company's three reactors at Oconee Nuclear Station.

The company and the Army Corps act in concert to release water from the reserviors and balance flows into the Savannah River.

rating

On Friday, Duke announced that the Keowee-Toxaway River Basin is in a "Stage 0" state of drought.

The drought designation — part of an interim drought-monitoring agreement between Duke and Upstate water pro-

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viders — is one step up from a category of "normal."

"'Normal' would represent the actual end of drought in the upper basin," Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said. "We have not yet met the conditions for normal, namely for remaining usable storage in the Duke Energy reservoirs."

The upgrade in drought conditions from "Stage 2" — which had been in place since January 2012 — lifts mandatory water conservation and irrigation restrictions on lake residents and requires Duke to "monitor conditions."

As of Friday, the Army Corps was no longer releasing water from its reservoirs, which means Hartwell will be on the rise into the near future as it stays around full pool, Corps spokesman Billy Birdwell said.

A winter and spring of steady, drenching rains prompted South Carolina's drought-response committee on April 24 to declare drought-free status for the entire state for the first time in three years.

At the time, Hartwell was 2 1/2 feet below full pool, Keowee one foot and Jocassee 17 feet.

However, heavy rains since the declaration helped raise Hartwell to six inches below full pool as of Friday.

Last weekend brought record rains.

In total over last Saturday and Sunday, 3.89 inches of rain fell at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, and more rain fell on Sunday — 3.18 inches — than any other May 5 on record, according to the National Weather Service.

As of Friday, Jocassee levels had risen more than 10 feet, to about six feet below full pool.

Keowee was at about 3 1/2 feet below full level on Friday, its level dropping as water was pumped upstream to Jocassee as part of Duke's pumped-storage hydroelectric system, Culbert said.

The lakes are rising just as Duke negotiates a renewal to its licensing agreement to continue hydro operations for the next 50 years.

The drought status has no direct impact on the relicensing process, which will be the subject of a public meeting on May 22, Culbert said.

The company decides drought status based on its "low inflow protocol," an interim agreement with Upstate water providers that was borne out of the relicensing process, Culbert said.

The plan provides specific benchmarks to determine drought status.

"The regional drought response plan is a most important tool in the way we propose managing water resources in dry conditions," said Steve Jester, vice president of Water Strategy, Hydro Licensing & Lake Services.

"Having a plan with clearly defined triggers that is nimble and able to respond appropriately to changing conditions is key," he said. "Receiving substantial rainfall this spring helps position the water storage in these reservoirs better for the summer months, when evaporation and required water releases can cause it to decline."

During the state drought committee's meeting, Duke presented its argument against lifting the drought status.

The company referenced its own forecast that the summer would be drier than normal and lake levels were "not likely to improve" as warmer weather brought evaporation.

Following the meeting, Duke's head of the relicensing effort, Jeff Lineberger, shared the company's disagreement in an email to the drought committee's coordinator, state climatologist Hope Mizzell.

In the email, Lineberger cited low lake levels and the U.S. Drought Monitor at the time showing the state in a drought. An update to the U.S. monitor later showed the state mostly out of a drought.

The state committee's decision, he wrote, was "premature" and would make it difficult to manage water under the company's agreement with water utilities, which helped preserve water in Keowee that without an agreement would have otherwise been used.

The challenge of local conditions being worse than overall indicators across a region is a frequent one, a sentiment Mizzell said she shared in subsequent conversations with Duke.

In those cases, Mizzell said, the committee defers to action required by local drought plans.