9/25/2010

Falling lake levels raise drought fears



Source: U.S. Geological Survey

Drier than normal October in Upstate forecast

By Anna Simon
CLEMSON BUREAU
asimon@greenvillenews.com

CLEMSON — The red ring around Upstate lakes is growing, and so are concerns about drought and the amount of water discharged downstream as lake levels drop and hot, dry weather continues in the Upstate.

As of Friday, Lake Hartwell was 4½ feet below full pool and had received just more than half an inch of rain all month. Lakes Russell and Thurmond had even less rain, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers data for the three-lake system that fell below an initial drought trigger early this month.

"Without tropical weather bringing the basin much-needed rainfall, we can expect continued drier-than-normal conditions and to reach Level 2 in late October," said Jeanne Hodge, a Corps spokesperson.

As for the Duke Energy lakes, Jocassee is 9 feet below full pool, and Keowee is 4 feet down.

Due to the heat, lack of rain and increased energy demand, Keowee may fluctuate as much as 2 to 3 feet within a day, said Erin Culbert, a Duke spokeswoman. Duke is maintaining Keowee at 3 to 5 feet below full pond as it makes required weekly releases downstream into Lake Hartwell.

> "The Corps is managing the water the best they can, but they can't put water in the lake."
>
> Dan Marett, security officer, Western Carolina Sailing Club

With temperatures in the 90s much of this month, there hasn't been the typical drop in evaporation and water

See LAKES on page 7A

LAKES

FROM PAGE 1A

use, said Hope Mizzell, the state climatologist. October is usually the driest month of the year, and a strengthening La Nina indicates a drier then normal fall and winter ahead, she said.

The ramps at the Western Carolina Sailing Club have a steeper slope to them as the water level drops in Lake Hartwell, and boat owners have started shortening the anchor chains at their moorings.

"It keeps on inching down. I don't have the fear that it's going to drop like it did before, but I hate to see it inching down," said Dan Marett, safety and security officer for the sailing club, who warns boaters to watch for shallows as the lake drops. Sail boats can run aground easily due to the depth of their keels, he said.

"The Corps is managing the water the best they can, but they can't put water in the lake," said Marett, who is kinder to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers than some of his Upstate neighbors who are critical of how much water is sent downstream from the Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond dams even as the lake drops.

"The lake was built for power generation, bottom line, and I think they're managing it better than they ever have," Marett said.

During the recent drought when the lake reached an unprecedented 22 feet below full pool, the sailing club used a crane to pull boats from the water after it dropped below the launch ramp. The club extended its ramp while the lake was low "and hopefully we will never have to face that again," Marett said.

Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association that has asked the Corps for earlier action to stem the outflow as lake levels drop, wonders whether a decade-long drought interrupted by only a couple of good rain years is really over or whether rain last winter and spring were only a respite.

"I think we all have that in the back of our minds," Burnham said.

Decades of drought

The state was declared fully out of drought in January after winter rain recharged the groundwater, then in July backslid to incipient drought status, which is the initial stage of drought.

"We can have these extended dry decades just like we can have extended wet periods," Mizzell said. South Carolina experienced extended severe drought in the mid-1920s, during the 1950s, and most recently over the past decade beginning in the late 1990s.

"What makes it so difficult now is the demand on the resource. More people are using the water for a wide range of uses from recreation to economic stability," Mizzell said. "Water woes and water wars" formerly limited to Western states have reached the Southeast.

When Hartwell and its sister lakes reached the first drought trigger, the Corps reduced outflow from the Thurmond dam to a maximum discharge of 4,200 cubic feet per second, as called for in the agency's lake management plan.

"The restriction will remain in place until both Thurmond and Hartwell rise 2 feet above Drought Level 1," Hodge said.

At Level 2, the cap on outflow moves to 4,000 cubic feet per second.

The Lake Hartwell Association and others want more "adaptive management" that would regulate outflow based on current conditions across the basin, for example cutting flow from Upstate lakes when it's raining downstream.

Hodge said the Corps will work with state and federal resource agencies to use "adaptive management approaches" while staying within the range of releases allowed in its current drought plan.

Virgil Hobbs III, the Corps' operations project manager for Lake Hartwell, recently told members of the newly formed Savannah River Basin Advisory Council that it isn't time yet to dip below the minimum flow restrictions because of environmental concerns.

Mike Caston, general manager of the Startex-Jackson-Wellford-Duncan Water District and a Lake Hartwell property owner said at the recent meeting that "we don't know" whether or not reduced discharge affects the environment.

The Corps recently received $500,000 for a long-sought study needed before consideration of any revision to its lake management policy, however South Carolina and Georgia must cough up matching funds in an economy that's drained state coffers.

There's been a long-standing tug-of-war between upstream and downstream residents and businesses along the Savannah River basin.

The advisory council plans to work toward "development and improvement" of a comprehensive statewide water planning program.

The Corps owns the dams and the land around and under the lakes, while South Carolina and Georgia own the water, an arrangement that's sometimes murkier than the Lake Hartwell floor.

"We really need a long-term study that looks at all of the pieces with the input of the Corps and the universities and the stakeholders," said Mike Massey, a Lake Hartwell Association board member who worked on legislation to create a comprehensive statewide plan that failed to pass this year.

Related legislation governing water withdrawals was approved, and State Rep. Don Bowen, R-Anderson, said he will re-introduce the comprehensive plan this year.

Regardless of the rainfall Sunday and any additional rain this week, water conservation also remains an issue, and Upstate water providers have taken various approaches to discourage wasteful water use.

In one effort, the Powdersville Water District recently joined with other Anderson, Pickens and Greenville county entities in a program called "Every Drop Counts South Carolina," to help customers with irrigation systems increase efficiency and reduce water bills.

Upstate lake levels

As of September 24

Lake	Full pool	Level
Blalock	710.00	709.36
Bowen	815.00	812.53
Greenwood	439.00	438.36
Hartwell	660.00	655.49
Jocassee	1110.00	1100.80
Keowee	800.00	795.80
Russell	475.00	471.29
Thurmond	330.00	325.30
Wateree	225.50	223.00
Wylie	590.00	586.30

* Feet above mean sea level

product,