Feds support state on drought's end

Duke says it will review its claim to contrary

By Eric Connor
Staff Writer
econnor@greenvilleonline.com

The record rainfall last weekend has prompted the federal government to join the state in declaring an end to South Carolina's persistent drought — and has impelled the region's chief energy provider to review its contention that a drought still exists.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages Lake Hartwell and lakes Thurmond and Russell downstream, said it would cease to operate the lakes under drought conditions and expects the lakes to be full into summer.

Meanwhile, Duke Energy said Thursday that it plans to announce today whether the company still considers the man-made lakes it manages — Keowee and Jocassee — in a state of drought.

"Duke Energy is aware that the corps' drought status has changed reflecting the recent rainfall, so we will be looking at those calculations to see what sort of drought-stage improvement we have," Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said.

The reassessment "will probably help synch us up with the true status of rainfall that

See DROUGHT, Page 3A

DROUGHT

Continued from Page 1A

has occurred over the last couple days," Culbert said.

Last week, the state government-sanctioned drought response committee declared the entirety of South Carolina free from drought for the first time in three years.

The committee considered several factors, including lake levels, stream flows, ground moisture, local water use and an abundance of winter and springtime rainfall with more expected.

Over the weekend, the National Weather Service in Greer measured record amounts of daily rainfall.

In total over 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, the weather service said.

The previous May 5 record had been 1.34 inches in 1991.

The rainfall continued a pattern that began at the onset of winter.

The Upstate 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.

Duke Energy presented its case not to lift the entire state out of drought.

The company uses the waters of Jocassee and Keowee for hydroelectricity and to cool its three reactors at Oconee Nuclear Station.

Following the decision, Duke expressed disappointment in the committee's decision in a letter to Mizzell, citing concerns over its collaborative efforts with water utilities and the corps to manage lake flows.

At the time of the committee's decision, lake levels were still low enough to require residents on Lake Keowee to irrigate lawns only twice weekly, Jeff Lineberger, Duke director of hydro strategy and licensing, wrote in the letter.

The Army Corps must draw water from Hartwell to balance levels on Lake Thurmond.

The corps operates under an agreement with Duke Energy in which the company agrees to release water from its Jocassee and Keowee reservoirs when low-water conditions persist.

"Once the winter and spring rains started, the reservoirs recovered very quickly," said Col. Jeff Hall, the corps' Savannah District commander. "Nature came through even better than we predicted earlier this year. The reservoirs will be full before Memorial Day and should remain full at least throughout June."

The corps manages the lakes releasing water into the Savannah River to balance the environment downstream, provide drinking water and generate hydroelectricity that it sells to utilities.

The corps considers all lakes it manages in the basin in drought status if any one is in a state of drought, corps spokesman Billy Birdwell said.

Rains beginning in December and continuing through this week caused a dramatic rise in lake levels, said Stan Simpson, the district's senior water manager.

"Our inflows were almost 10 times as much as we were releasing, resulting in rapid increases in the pool elevations," Simpson said.

Water must be released into Thurmond until levels at Hartwell Lake reach 658 feet and Thurmond Lake reaches 328 feet.

Hartwell Lake – which is considered full a 660 feet — had exceede 658 feet two weeks ag but restrictions to balanc Thurmond remained unt Thurmond could reac 328 feet.

Thurmond reached 32 feet on May 7, the fir time it had reached th level since the end March 2011.