Hartwell's gains buoy businesses



JOHN C. STEVENSON / Staff

David Freeman, owner and operator of Portman Marina, plans to move his gas dock back into position with Lake Hartwell's levels projected to rise.

Merchants hope projected rise brings end to financial dry spell

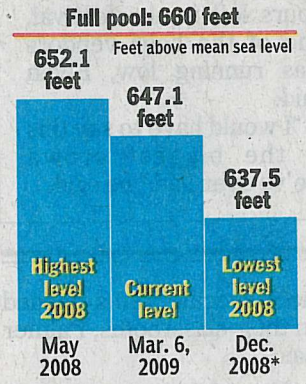
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Recent rain and snow that raised Lake Hartwell about a foot and a new lake management decision have significantly changed projected lake levels going into summer — for the better.

Based on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' latest projection, David Freeman, owner and operator of Portman Marina near Anderson, said he can move his gas dock back into position — something boaters depend on for fuel and Freeman depends on for revenue.

The gas dock had been stored in a nearby cove when lake levels hit a record 22-foot low earlier this winter. Late February corps projections indicated Hartwell would be 18 feet low by the start of summer, and Freeman didn't think he'd have enough water to bring the gas dock back.

Lake Hartwell by the numbers



*All-time record
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

Late last week, the corps made a decision to stop taking water from Hartwell for three to six weeks. Factoring in that decision and the recent rain, a revised corps calculation raised the projected May lake level another eight feet, about a foot shy of where Hartwell was last May.

The difference is huge for Freeman, who has a 400-boat facility with two restaurants, and business owners like him who depend on the lake. They've watched their businesses and the local economy dry up with the lake for more than a year

See LAKE on page 2A

LAKE

FROM PAGE 1A

and have taken a second hit from the recession on top of the drought.

Lake Hartwell was 647.09 feet above mean sea level last Friday, which is nearly 13 feet below full pool. The new projection puts Hartwell 10 feet below full pool at the beginning of May.

The May projections matter. That's the start of increasing summer demand on the lake for outdoor watering and the loss of water through evaporation.

With predictions of continued dry conditions, state climatologist Hope Mizzell would like to see it even higher.

Mike Massey, board member and past president of the Lake Hartwell Association, said that group and others are banding together to call for a better look at how water is used in the entire Savannah River basin from the mountains to the coast.

"There just is not enough water coming in, even though the water we got the other day did help," Massey said. "We think there are a number of things that have to happen to try to keep the water in the lakes."

The biggest is adaptive management — adjusting flow according to current conditions rather than a fixed minimum outflow.

"The corps will say they are doing it, but we think they can probably be more proactive in its use," Massey said.

The corps does use and will continue to use adaptive management, said corps spokesman Billy Birdwell.

Also, the corps has begun an environmental assessment process to reduce flow from Upstate lakes again next winter, with the reduction possibly starting earlier than in 2008, Birdwell said.

At the request of South Carolina and Georgia, the corps reduced required outflow from the Thurmond dam from 3,600 cubic feet per second to 3,100 cubic feet per second from Nov. 24 - Feb. 1 to conserve water in its three Upstate lakes. By the beginning of February, Hartwell rose seven feet from its early December low.

The states have requested a flow reduction beginning in October this year, Birdwell said.