

Mike Spoon gasses up a boat at Portman Marina on Lake Hartwell. Higher gas prices and low water levels both could have an impact on recreational use of Upstate lakes this summer. KEN OSBURN / STAFF

Hot summer would hit Upstate's lakes hard

Recreation, water use grow at same time as dry season begins

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Experts call for a long, hot summer, and area lakes that provide recreation and a source of water for hundreds of thousands of Upstate residents are already low, raising concerns about what may be ahead.

Upstate counties where the big lakes are located remain in severe drought, and stream flow feeding into the Upstate lakes is less than 25 percent of normal, said Hope Mizzell, state climatologist.

Both Mizzell and the Climate Prediction center of the National Weather Service anticipate above normal temperatures through summer. There's "no strong signal" rainfall amount, said Neil Dixon, a meteorologist, at the National Weather Service office in Greer.

Rain in the typically wetter months winter and early spring months "is the storage you have to work with," Mizzell said. "Unless it's a heavy event from a tropical system coming through, you don't gain much in the summer."

Lake Jocassee is 25 feet below full pond, and Lake Keowee, which draws from Jocassee, is running about three feet below full pond, according to Duke Energy data.



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DAVID FREEMAN, MARINA OWNER

Lake Hartwell, at more than seven feet below full pond, is below The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' second drought trigger level, according to corps data.

"We are looking at continued decline in the reservoirs over the long term, and continued dry weather," said Billy Birdwell, a cCorps spokesman. "We are starting at a deficit."

The corps has gotten water from reservoirs upstream — Duke Energy's Keowee, Jocassee and Bad Creek — and is holding Hartwell "as stable as we can," Birdwell said.

This is spawning season, and the corps wants to hold lake levels stable to protect the fish eggs laid in shallow areas from drying out, Birdwell said.

Corps experts don't expect Hartwell to reach the record 22-foot low of 2008, Birdwell said.

The agency, which operates lakes Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond as a single system, has reduced flow through the Lake Thurmond dam to the minimum allowable under current regulations. That should continue until the lakes are above

LAKE

Continued from Page 1A

drought trigger levels and possibly even beyond that point, Birdwell said.

The corps also has just released a draft environmental assessment for public comment that would update how it manages the three Upstate lakes in a drought. It would allow lower releases from the three-lake system under certain conditions at certain times of year.

The environmental assessment is a big deal for the Lake Hartwell Association, which wants lake levels kept higher in Hartwell to protect recreational use, water supply, property values and lake-related businesses.

It would allow the corps to keep more water in Upstate lakes until a second phase of a comprehensive study is finished that could lead to changes in current federal regulations governing management of the lakes, said Herb Burnham, president of the more than 2,000 member association.

The association wants "this moved quickly before summer takes its toll" on the lake with high temperatures, evaporation and higher water use, Burnham said.

The corps has "done a pretty good job of keeping the lake within seven or eight feet of full pond, said David Freeman, owner of Portman Marina. The marina has to start extending numerous docks when the water drops to nine feet below full pond, a time-consuming and costly job.

Now the typically dry months of summer are ahead, and Freeman hopes lake levels will remain fairly stable. He projects a good boating season this summer despite high gas prices.

"The economy is getting better, and when people feel better, they are more likely to include recreation in their lives," Freeman said.

People will get out on the lake, although they'll probably adjust their boating habits to use less gas, riding around the lake less and spending more time stopped to fish, swim, picnic and enjoy being on the water, he said.

Water supply 'solid'

Scott Willett, executive director Anderson Regional Joint Water System, said Hartwell "is not where I'd like to start the year," however the water supply "is pretty solid."

The corps "has pretty strong conservation measures in effect" through lowered releases, and there has been some rain, Willett said.

"If we can stay out of worst case drought this summer, we should be OK," Willett said. "We have 30 some feet of water over the intake. On water supply, we are pretty positive. We would like to have a little more elevation in the lake for general storage and recreation."

Despite the ongoing drought, few public water systems have experienced supply problems, Mizzell said.

"A lot of our water systems have taken the appropriate measures over the years to insure adequate water supply," Mizzell said. "We have had growth, but water systems in general have made appropriate long range plans."

Duke has restricted use of irrigation pumps for residents on Keowee and Jocassee to two days a week, Tuesdays and Saturdays, to conserve water.

Any future restrictions are "closely tied to rainfall," said Erin Culbert, a Duke spokeswoman. "We will continue to monitor it."