Residents want corps to stop draining lakes



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Recreation spots on Lake Hartwell remain dry despite recent rains.

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Keep water here, groups urge

Low lake levels cost region jobs, cash, recreation, advocates say

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Water flowing through Hartwell Dam is a key factor in controlling lake levels.

Homeowners and businesses on Lake Hartwell and the two other U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' reservoirs could only watch last year as the lake waters receded relentlessly from what was once their high-valued, lakefront property.

Now, as the Upstate once again heads into the typically dry summer season, many of those same people are pressing the corps and their elected representatives in Washington to act now to avoid a repeat of their 2008 nightmares.

The 2,000-member Lake Hartwell Association has joined other groups on lakes Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond to call for reduced outflow from those reservoirs until all three are full.

Tommy Lee, who with his business partner started SaveOurLakesNow.org online and a paper petition drive, said about 10,000 signatures have been gathered.

Lee, a businessman and developer who owns a construction company

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and two marinas on Lake Thurmond, hopes to have 50,000 to 100,000 signatures on the petitions to immediately reduce flow from 3,600 cubic feet per second to 3,100 cubic feet per second until the lakes fill.

Mike Massey, chairman of the Lake Hartwell Association's South Carolina Legislative Committee, said, "There is a lot of water pouring in below Thurmond dam, and we're not sure it is necessary at this point."

Billy Birdwell, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman, said the corps already has started an environmental assessment process to reduce outflow to 3,100 cubic feet per second for four months in the fall and winter, from October through January.

"We are already moving in that direction. We were doing that before the petition came to our attention," Birdwell said, adding the impetus comes from South Carolina and Georgia — which own the water — and the corps itself.

Birdwell said the higher outflow is needed at other times of the year to protect environmental and water quality issues downstream.

Warmer water doesn't hold as much oxygen as cooler water, which affects fish and also the quality of water for human use as it moves downstream to Augusta, North Augusta and Aiken, Birdwell said.

Downstream flow keeps saltwater out of drinking water intakes for Savannah and the Jasper-Beaufort Water Authority, Birdwell said.

Massey said lengthening the time of the reduction two more months, from October through March, should raise lake levels about three feet a year.

Currently, the corps has stopped releasing water from Hartwell in order to raise the level and rebalance its three Upstate lakes.

Once releases from Hartwell resume, "it will be dropping, especially if we don't get any rain" Massey said.

In the summer, "we lose one foot a month just to evaporation," Massey said.

Lower lake levels mean fewer visitors, and lake home sales already are down considerably as waterfront lots dry up, Massey said.

"During this drought, sales have pretty much stopped," said Mike Gray, broker at Hartwell Lake Properties.

Homes rarely sell in coves where lake water disappears, but when the lake recovers, these home typically have appreciated in value and move well, Gray said.

In Clemson, where about a dozen collegiate rowing teams had planned spring practice on Hartwell, all but five canceled because of low water, said Chris Hardy, president of the Clemson Area Chamber of Commerce.

Each team represents about $100,000 in economic impact to the area, Hardy said.

In Clemson, where boardwalks of what was a lakefront city park now rise above parched ground, Mayor Larry Abernathy supports efforts to raise the lake's water level.

"We would like to be a real lakefront city again," Abernathy said.

U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, whose 3rd Congressional District includes the Savannah River Basin lakes, wrote a letter earlier this month requesting a reduction to 3,100 cubic feet per second for April and May and has met with corps officials, said his spokeswoman, Emily Tyner.

Barrett plans to continue to work on policy regarding water levels "to make sure the human interests are protected," she said.

While Barrett isn't in complete agreement with the full petition request, he does believe that downstream releases should be maintained at 3,100 cubic feet per second until the lakes reach a certain level. But he stops short of agreeing with the association's petition calling for maintaining the 3,100 cubic foot flow until the lakes are completely full.

Kevin Bishop, spokesman for U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, said "Sen. Graham is greatly concerned about what this means for the recreational and tourism-related jobs that rely on the lake for income. He also is concerned about the towns and communities who count on the lakes for a clean, safe supply of drinking water," Bishop said.

Graham will continue to work with Barrett "to help balance the needs of all the stakeholders involved in the use and management of the lakes," Bishop said.

Lee said a past environmental assessment showed no significant impact to the Savannah River at 3,100 cubic feet per second.

"The corps doesn't see the economic impact on the lakes. It's an absolute disaster for Hartwell," said Lee. "As Thurmond goes, so goes Hartwell, so we're in this thing together."