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Keowee residents object to plan that would lower lake

More than 700 signatures gathered so far as Duke Energy floats ideas to deal with drought

By Anna Bard Brutzman

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SUNSET —More than 700 residents along Lake Keowee have signed a petition objecting to a proposal that would let the lake drop an additional five feet during extreme droughts.

Duke Energy has since the early 1990s operated the Keowee hydroelectric dam to let the reservoir never fall more than about five feet below full pool — a boon to local Realtors who market the lake as the most stable reservoir in the region.

Under a "trial balloon" plan presented to lake stakeholders in September, Duke officials outlined circumstances under which the lake could be lowered an additional one to five feet in the event of increasingly dry conditions. That trial balloon plan was shared publicly with lakeside homeowners in late October and again a week before Thanksgiving, prompting the petition drive.

Newton Brightwell, a resident of The Reserve at Keowee, penned the petition. He said his first response to the plan in late October was "this is terrible," and he said he has not since received satisfactory answers from Duke Energy about the potential benefits of a plan to lower the lake.

"Duke's number is that 46 percent of the docks on Keowee would be on dry land if the lake were down 10 feet," Brightwell said.

Unlike Hartwell Lake, where lakeside residents can "chase the water" by pushing their floating docks deeper into the manmade lake's stream channels, Keowee residents must keep their docks in place.

Duke Energy spokeswoman Erin Culbert said the energy company is entertaining suggestions that Keowee residents be able to move their docks in the future — but many owners have designed their docks not to move. Some are perched on supports that are anchored in the ground.

Andy Lee, owner of Lake Keowee Real Estate, said his company developed the bulk of subdivisions, about 40 of them, around the lake, and has always marketed it as a lake

where the water is consistently within five feet of full. He said to change that now would have a "tremendous impact" on property values.

"It's what separates us from the TVA and corps lakes," Lee said. "I've oftentimes recommended people go to other lakes throughout the region and at different times of year so that can fully understand the fluctuating lake levels in this area."

Culbert said that before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission required Duke to maintain more steady lake levels on Keowee in 1989, the lake dropped as much as 17 feet. That was in 1981, and the lake has never fallen below 792 feet above sea level in 22 years. Before the NRC asserted controls on Keowee, the lake was designed to drop as much as 25 feet if necessary.

"On Keowee, there is an artificial sense that water supply is limitless because of the narrow band of operations under which it has operated," Culbert said. "Just look at Jocassee to the north, which can fall 30 feet, and Hartwell to the south, which go as low as 35. You get the sense we have to plan for a regional approach, a balanced approach to provide for all water needs."

Still, for lakeside property owners who have typically paid 10 times as much for a lot on Keowee compared to Hartwell, changing the rules after the fact is unfair.

"Duke issued me a permit three years ago when they knew they were thinking about this change," said Brightwell, who moved to the area at that time from California after having lived all over the U.S. "These are substantial structures, and you don't swing them around easily. Chasing water isn't practical, and for some people it's not possible at all."

Culbert said Tuesday that she could not detail what the conditions would be that would trigger draw-downs of the lake, but she emphasized that the plan is preliminary and open for at least another four years to public comment as Duke pursues a new license for the Keowee-Toxaway Project from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

She said stream flows, regional rainfall amounts, as well as downstream water supply, would be factors, and all of these are still be negotiated.

She also said that conditions that would bring about a stage 4 — or 10 foot — draw-down of Lake Keowee have occurred less than 1 percent of the time over the past 70 years.

"We are talking about a very infrequent occurrence," she said, adding that increasingly dry conditions in the region mean Duke and other reservoir operators need more "tools in the toolbox" to respond.

Duke's current license with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will expire in 2016, and the energy giant has been following a federally mandated process for the past three years to involve stakeholders — including homeowners — in the relicensing process, Culbert said.

Duke plans to file its application with the commission in August 2014; the timeline now calls for stakeholders to sign a binding agreement to its plans by November 2013.

Duke has an agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, also soon to expire, that lays out how much water must flow through the Keowee dam to satisfy downstream demand. Culbert said the energy commission required Duke, as part of its relicensing, to update this agreement.

Keowee is full at 800 feet above mean sea level and currently remains between that and 794.6 feet. Under the proposal, Keowee could fall to 794 feet under "Stage 1" drought conditions, 793 feet in Stage 2, 792 feet in Stage 3 and 790 under the most severe, Stage 4, conditions.

Ben Turetsky, executive director of Friends of Lake Keowee or FOLKS, said his group as an official stakeholder in the relicensing process has signed an agreement not to advocate publicly for or against any of Duke's proposals. The organization's leaders have, therefore, not helped with the petition or commented publicly about it. But, Turetsky said, FOLKS members are pushing Duke "hard" during its stakeholder meetings.

"There was as trial balloon and the stakeholder team has been looking at the metrics around that proposal and making suggestions for other model runs or things other than what was in the trial balloon," Turetsky said, adding that nothing Duke has proposed has been "cast in concrete."



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