Lake Hartwell levels highest in 2 years

BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

As warmer temperatures bring people outside to enjoy Oconee County lakes, residents and visitors to Lake Hartwell are taking advantage of water levels that are at their highest in nearly two years.

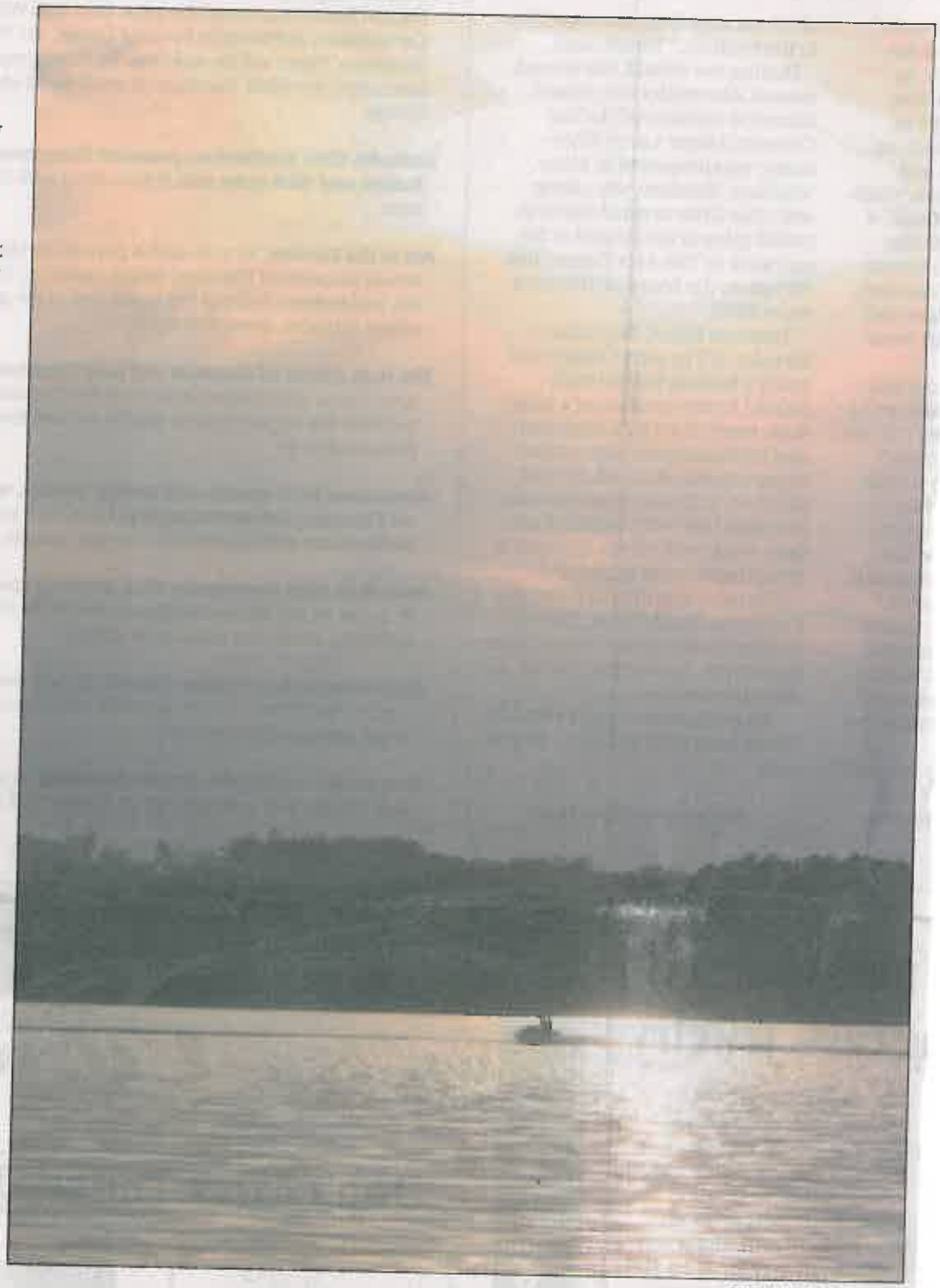
Ken Bedenbaugh, program manager for recreation at Lake Hartwell for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said Lake Hartwell measured 659.77 feet Friday, just below the "full pool" level of 660 feet.

"June of 2011 was the last time you saw lake levels where they currently are," said Bedenbaugh. "We are pretty close to a full pool. We started getting some pretty steady and consistent rains and it started coming back up to where we are. The rain does help."

Just five months ago, Lake Hartwell fell to its lowest point of the past two years when it hit 644.77 feet. Bedenbaugh said the average lake level since the summer of 2011 has been about 650 feet — 10 feet below full pool.

The timing of the restoration of the lake level comes about a week before the Memorial Day weekend, seen by many as the beginning of the summer season.

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A lone jet skier enjoys a sunset ride on Lake Hartwell, where water levels have increased to their highest levels in nearly two years. The higher levels come a week before the Memorial Day weekend, considered by many to mark the official start of summer.

LEVELS: 'We'll see a lot of gas being sold at the marinas'

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Gene Blair
Resident of Chickasaw Point and a member of the Oconee County Economic Development Commission

"As a resident on the lake with a boat that I can finally see when I look out my window because it's finally up to the full pool, that's wonderful for recreation," said Gene Blair, a member of the Oconee County Economic Development Commission who has owned a home at Chickasaw Point for the past eight years. "Last summer, you really didn't go out on the boat because you were worried about what you could hit unless you were just cruising at two miles an hour because everything was coming to the surface. This time, because you know the lake when it is at full pool, you're just more relaxed and have a better recreational experience."

While the Corps of Engineers often gets criticism when the lakes are low, Bedenbaugh said a full pool is also important for the corps' work.

"Everyone likes a full lake, including us," said Bedenbaugh. "We don't like low lake levels just like everybody else. But, you've got to have consistent and adequate inflows to maintain lake levels because this project is not just here to service recreation or keep water under boat docks.

"There are several missions that we have to meet: downstream navigation, water supply downstream and hydropower, of course. We have several missions we have to meet and those missions sometimes compete with one another."

He said current projections from the corps have Lake Hartwell remaining at 659-660 feet for the next 10 weeks.

"They are not showing much change out to 10 weeks," he said. "A lot of factors can change that. If we suddenly go back to a real dry spell, that will impact us a little more than probably predicted. If we can continue to get some pretty routine and consistent rainfall, it looks like this summer is going to be a pretty good summer."

Chuck Kormelink, of Lake and Land Realty, said the improvement in the lake levels at Lake Hartwell is already bringing people to the lake for recreation and to purchase property.

"The interest in the lake has come up with the lake levels," said Kormelink. "The comments I am getting from both sellers and buyers, as well as tourists, is that the lake looks good and everybody is more amenable to doing business here on the lake. It's directly reflective of the lake level. If we keep the lake level as it is right now we will have the people flocking back and using Lake Hartwell and buying on Lake Hartwell."

Blair agreed that the higher lake levels improve property values and the economic boost the lake can provide.

"In order to be able to sell a home on the lake, you've got to have water in it," he said. "When the lake was down, you had a decimation of the number of people who were using the lake. You probably had one out of 10 participating in that water in terms of any kind of boating activity. But, now it has probably completely reversed itself.

"We'll see a lot of gas being sold at the marinas. We'll see a lot of people being hired to pump that gas. From an economic standpoint that lake being full is absolutely critical."

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