Lake Hartwell recovering after rainy, stormy March

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CLEMSON — Lake Hartwell's water levels continued their rise throughout March, bolstered by last week's 2 inches of rainfall that drenched the Upstate.

"March has been a good month," Billy Birdwell of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Monday. "March so far has been the second wettest month of the last 12."

National Weather Service statistics show spots in the Upstate saw anywhere from 6.65 inches in Anderson to 6.93 inches in Greenville during the month of March. Lake Hartwell's 651.33 feet above mean sea level is the highest it's been since last June, and despite the improvement, Birdwell said he does not anticipate the corps to resume water releases from Hartwell any time in the near future.

The corps' projections in early February showed some stagnation in lake levels through April, anticipating it to hover between 645 and 646 feet. The release of water from Hartwell at a rate of 3,600 gallons per cubic feet was stopped in order to maintain balance in the Savannah River Basin's reservoirs, as the winter precipitation in early March meant the Savannah River's streams and tributaries fully supported the basin's downstream needs, swelling Thurmond's waters.

"The two reservoirs are still out of balance," Birdwell said. "Thurmond has more water than it needs to be in balance with Hartwell. So we'll continue to hold water in Hartwell, and Thurmond will continue to discharge downstream."

Hartwell's 651.33 level might be shy of the targeted 659 for this time of year, but its rise is a welcome sight considering its low point just four months ago, when it was 637.

"We're expecting to enter summer vacation with essentially the same level we had a year ago," Birdwell said. "That isn't the best place to be, but it's a lot better than we originally anticipated. Maybe, if we get even more rain, they could be higher than they were a year ago."

Patrick Moore of the National Weather Service said March had been a particularly soggy month in the Upstate, as rainfall has been nearly 2 inches above normal. After the latest round of precipitation, the Upstate finds itself less than an inch below normal for the year.

"In the last week we've actually caught up a lot," Moore said. "At one point before this rainy period, we were more than two inches below normal."