Lake Hartwell's level to be high this winter

Water will be held back to facilitate work on Lake Thurmond dam

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Downstream flow from the Lake Thurmond dam has been temporarily cut while tests are conducted in the Savannah Harbor, then Thurmond will be lowered for dam maintenance this winter, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman said.

The corps has received federal stimulus money for needed maintenance that will begin this winter on the dams at lakes Thurmond and Russell, said Billy Birdwell, a corps spokesman.

As a result, residents and boaters on Hartwell can expect lake levels to be higher than what's usual for a good winter — a dramatic change from last year's drought, when Hartwell hit a record 22-foot low.

Flow from the Thurmond dam was cut Nov. 6 and was limited to 3,800 cubic feet per second daily for seven days to assist with a salt intrusion test on the lower end of the river, Birdwell said.

The test requires a low flow at the city of Savannah municipal water intake on Abercorn Creek that coincided with higher-than-average tides to determine how much, if any, salt water could reach the intakes if the Corps of Engineers deepens the Savannah Harbor.

The test was part of an environmental study related to a proposal to deepen the harbor by as much as an additional six feet for shipping.

It takes approximately seven days for water to move from the Thurmond Dam to the estuary of the Savannah River, Birdwell said.

Then flow from Thurmond will be increased to approximately 13,000 cubic feet per second to lower that lake's surface by Dec. 1 to a normal winter level of 326 feet above mean sea level. The lake will be maintained at that level through the winter for the safety of workers on the dam maintenance project, Birdwell said.

Flows from Thurmond have been averaging approximately 8,500 cubic feet per second in recent weeks because the corps' three Upstate lakes are now above drought trigger levels and no longer under flow restrictions.

Hartwell will be used to bank additional water if needed downstream in case of a dry spell and to help maintain Thurmond at around 328 feet next summer, Birdwell said.

Hartwell will likely be above the normal winter level of 656 feet above mean sea level but probably will be kept below full pond of 660 feet to prevent shoreline erosion due to higher winter wind, Birdwell said.

For Lake Hartwell, the corps considers 656 feet to be full pool in the winter and 660 feet to be full pool in the summer, Birdwell said.