LAKE OUTFLOW REDUCED

Hartwell levels will be kept in place until waterway reaches full pool, corps says

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Those who live, work and recreate on Lake Hartwell may get some relief from sinking water levels that have now reached a low point in the latest drought and have triggered a reduction in flow out of the lake.

Over the next several days, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will reduce outflow from the lake from 3,800 cubic feet per second to 3,100 cfs, based on a maximum daily average, after the lake slipped to more than 14 feet below full pool Wednesday evening.

Hartwell's low water has activated the third of four drought levels the corps uses to manage flow out of the reservoir that also provides water for drinking, power, industrial, fish and wildlife, flood risk, navigation and recreation uses along the Savannah River Basin.

Hartwell sat at 645.79 feet Thursday afternoon, the lowest point it's reached since it dipped 22 feet during the 2008-2009 drought.

"The big change is going down to 3,100 (cfs)," said Billy Birdwell, a corps spokesman. "We've done it before, but we'd had to do it on a year-by-year basis and do an environmental assessment each time we'd want to do that."

This time, an environmental assessment put in place in August allows the corps flexibility to assess the drought status without doing a new en-

See HARTWELL, Page 5B

HARTWELL

Continued from Page 1B

vironmental assessment each time, he said.

The corps can keep flow reduction at 3,100 cfs through the end of January because in winter months cooler water can hold more oxygen for fish downstream, the corps said.

Normally, once water levels begin to rise, the corps would revert to higher outflows in the spring and summer months, Birdwell said.

But to help the corps-managed lakes Hartwell, Thurmond and Russell recover, Savannah District Commander Col. Jeff Hall authorized the water manager at Hartwell to maintain 3,800 cfs outflow during spring, summer and fall months until the lakes fully recover and reach full pool.

"We've discussed this informally with the resource agencies, and they're with us on this," Birdwell said. "Instead of stepping back up, we're going to hold at the lower rate until we reach full summer pool."

The flow reduction may be too little too late to help those who live, work and play at Lake Hartwell, but "we'll take any help we can get," said Herb Burnham, president of the 2,000-member Lake Hartwell Association. "We certainly don't turn it down, but it could have been done a lot earlier I think."

Burnham said the corps is doing the best it can do under current circumstances, but it is handicapped by federal regulations that prevent it from adapting quickly to weather changes that affect water levels.

"We really need to get something in place that will allow the corps to act in a more timely fashion," Burnham said.

Stakeholders have turned for help to state and national representatives to bring changes that would allow the corps to adaptively manage the basin, Burnham said.

At the same time, they're seeking help to fund the state's $250,000 portion of a $1 million second phase of a comprehensive basin study needed to bring better management techniques, he said.

Stakeholders have tried to secure funding since 2007, he said. Some $100,000 was set aside in this year's state budget, and the rest may be funded through in-kind labor or private donations.

The flow reductions will take place over the next several days. By Friday, the corps has a targeted outflow of 3,600 cfs. It will step down to 3,400 cfs by Nov. 6 and 3,200 cfs by Nov. 9, according to the corps.

By Nov. 10, it should reach 3,100 cfs, which will be maintained through the end of January.

The gradual reduction allows the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife to monitor how freshwater mussels along the river banks downstream adapt to the dropping water levels, Birdwell said.

The lower Savannah River will see effects of flow reductions about a week after the outflow reduction, the corps said.