Lake-level worries return to Hartwell

Rain again below average; residents want earlier response to any drought

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CLEMSON — Lake Hartwell's cool waters beckon like an oasis these hot summer days, yet David Freeman fears they could vanish like a mirage if lessons of last winter's drought are forgotten.

Freeman, owner of Portman Marina, remembers the cost — several hundred thousand dollars — of moving docks to chase receding water and how his restaurant revenue dropped, like the lake, below a wide red line. He fears that now, with the lake at a closer-to-normal level, progress prompted by last year's looming crisis has stalled.

At 655 feet above mean sea level, Hartwell is five feet below full pool and more than 17 feet above its December low. It's less than two feet below average for this time of year but higher than at any time in 2008.

Despite the recovery, Freeman watches the weather forecast.

"I am a little concerned because we are a little down in rainfall for the year," Freeman said.

Freeman's greater concern is that current Corps of Engineers' policy on releases from its three Upstate lakes — Hartwell and lakes Russell and Thurmond — continues to allow higher releases when water should be conserved.

As of Thursday, the

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BART BOATWRIGHT / Staff

Portman Marina owner David Freeman stands at his marina in Anderson.

Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport received 27.18 inches of rainfall this year — about five inches below normal, according to the National Weather Service office in Greer.

The U.S. Drought Monitor shows the Upstate "abnormally dry" but not in drought. The Upstate was officially removed from drought status when the state Drought Response Committee met in June.

"We have fallen back a little bit," said Bryan McAvoy, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Greer. "We started wet in the spring, but as we've gone into the summer months, we've been below normal."

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 10-week projection shows Hartwell falling to 650 feet.

There is some good news: Long range forecasts from the Climate Prediction Center call for near normal rainfall for the Upstate through November.

And homeowners and businesses — the water customers — have continued to conserve water. Water use stayed down even after the drought ended, said Scott Willett, director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System, which provides water from Hartwell to 14 systems in Pickens and Anderson counties.

Willett said he's "cautiously optimistic" but "attentive at this point" concerning lake levels. "If we don't get rain, the lakes will go down. We're starting to get back into that worry zone."

Measures taken by the Corps last winter to lower the flow from the three lake system and entirely stop releases from Hartwell most of March and April brought Hartwell back from a 22-foot low, said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association.

"Hartwell is in pretty good shape. The Corps is, from our standpoint, trying to keep water in Hartwell," he said.

However, Burnham said he's "not sure that the drought is over," and lake levels are always a concern.

The 2,000-plus member Lake Hartwell Association has proposed a revised drought plan to the Corps that would keep discharge from the three-lake system through the Thurmond dam below 3,600 cubic feet per second, Burnham said.

The proposed change in the Corps' drought management policy would retain more water in Upstate lakes and give more upfront protection against any future drought.

Action is needed "on the front end of a drought as opposed to when the lake is 18 feet down," Willett said.

The Savannah River basin runs from the North Carolina mountains and Duke Energy's lakes Jocassee and Keowee, through Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond, down to the coast and out to the sea. In the Upstate, people want the lakes full. Those on the coastal end of the river basin say they need a flow of water for drinking and industrial use, to sustain aquatic life and to prevent salt water intrusion into municipal water system intakes and wells.

The Corps must maintain a balance among all the various needs along the Savannah River Basin, said Billy Birdwell, a Corps spokesman.

The Corps is "managing the water professionally to meet downstream needs but not taking any more than necessary from upstream," Birdwell said.

The Corps reduced the amount of water released downstream from its three Upstate lakes to stay below the maximum allowed as a precaution against another drought should Mother Nature be stingy with the rain, Birdwell said.

Reduction of downstream flow to 3,600 cubic feet per second earlier this year helped restore Upstate lakes but "probably had negative impacts on the downstream ecology," Birdwell said. For that rea-

son, the Corps doesn't want to run that low if not necessary, he said.

Discharges remain on the conservative side, at 4,000 cubic feet when the management plan would allow 4,200 cubic feet per second at current lake levels, Birdwell said.

The Corps continues to work on an Environmental Assessment to enable a lowering of outflow to 3,100 cubic feet per second if justified, depending on the water level, between Nov. 1 and Feb. 28 this coming winter, Birdwell said.

Other efforts are taking place at the state level, where two pieces of proposed legislation would impact how water from all lakes, rivers, streams and other bodies of water in the state are used and managed.

Proposed legislation in the state Senate would require permits for anyone who draws any water from any lake, river, stream or other body of water in the state, said state Sen. Kevin Bryant, R-Anderson, whose district includes much of Lake Hartwell.

The proposal currently is logjammed on the issue of a state restricted minimum flow standard, with industry on one side and the Coastal Conservation League on the other, Bryant said.

"Some minimum flow is better than nothing," said Bryant, who is pushing for approval of the measure now and readjustment, if need be, in the future. "We need this now to make sure we're not drained dry," he said.

A second piece of proposed legislation, now in the state House Agriculture Committee, would create a statewide water management plan and is strongly supported by the Lake Hartwell Association.

Management of all lakes, rivers and other waters in the state would be coordinated under one umbrella rather than the current "piecemeal" structure under agencies including the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and the state Department of Natural Resources, Bryant said.

Movement on the legislation has slowed since the drought ended, Bryant said.

"During the drought, we were getting good progress. Now that the lake (Hartwell) is in good shape, it's being put on a back burner," Bryant said.

"We need to know what's happening all over the state in terms of water," Bryant said. It would help in management of any future droughts and also is needed to improve South Carolina's credibility in courtroom water wars with neighboring North Carolina and Georgia, which both have statewide water plans, Bryant said.

"Courts frown on us when we're doing a bad job of managing our own water," Bryant said.

Burnham worries that Atlanta could try to "put a straw" in Hartwell and that without a state water plan, South Carolina would be in a weaker position than Georgia. Currently, Georgia law forbids interbasin water transfers; however laws can be changed, Burnham said.

"Georgia is way ahead of South Carolina in water planning," Burnham said. "That's one we're watching closely."