LAKE'S CLOUDY FUTURE



Businesses along Lake Hartwell depend on strong recreational use and suffer when water levels fall. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

After 50 years, Hartwell may be threatened by growth

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The Hartwell dam, seen here in 1962, was a source of electricity for a then-rural area. FILE

CLEMSON — Fifty years after water began to fill a man-made reservoir that would become Hartwell Lake, a source of water, power, recreation and beauty, some worry that the growth the popular lake attracts now threatens its future.

The Savannah River Basin "doesn't have enough water reserves to meet all of the demands placed on it" during drought, and that will worsen as the region grows, said Doug Young, a Lake Hartwell resident who serves on the state Drought Response Committee and a federal water quantity committee for Duke Energy's Keowee Toxaway relicensing.

The 2010 census shows 831,812 people in Greenville, Pickens, Anderson and Oconee counties. The State Budget and Control Board projects more than a million residents in these counties by 2035.

Young fears that there isn't enough water to support the growth in towns and cities currently using the water, not to mention a thirsty Atlanta's potential need to tap new resources.

"There are only a few major rivers in the Upstate, and there are no more water sources available," Young said. "We need to treat what decreasing water we receive with more respect."

See LAKE, Page 11A

LAKE

Continued from Page 1A

As the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans for a 50th anniversary celebration on April 27, commemorating the day the first generator at the Hartwell dam went on line, some Upstate residents and leaders worry whether the resource can last another 50 years.

"We've run into a couple of eye-opening droughts here. Somehow we need to change how much water we hold in these reservoirs when the reservoirs are full," said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association that wants more water retained in the lake at early signs of drought.

"When you get 2 feet down, let's consider that we could be going into a drought," Burnham said.

That's not part of the lake management plan used by the Corps of Engineers, which must manage the lake to meet the needs of upstream and downstream users all along the Savannah River Basin from the Pickens and Oconee mountains to the coast, said Billy Birdwell, a corps spokesman.

"What we do in one part of the basin impacts other parts of the basin," Birdwell said. "Doing something at Hartwell impacts Beaufort County. The drinking water stored at Hartwell eventually finds its way to the city water intakes for Savannah. We can't do anything without looking at all of the aspects."

U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan, whose 3rd Congressional District includes the Upper Savannah basin, said he recently met with the corps to encourage smaller releases of water from the agency's three Upstate lakes in cooler months before reaching triggers that mandate reductions, something that's been done in past droughts.

"I believe we need to be as proactive as we possibly can in keeping as much water in the lakes as we can," Duncan said.

"By dropping the releases, we could keep our lakes up 4 to 6 feet throughout the winter into spring. Since the prediction for rain is not very good, this small change could make a significant difference," Duncan said.

"We don't want to get into the situation we were in during the last drought. Prevention is a much better option."

On Thursday, Hartwell was more than 7½ feet below full pool, according to corps data. The National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center expects drought to persist or intensify in the Upstate through the end of the year.

Drought drove Hartwell down an unprecedented 22 feet in 2008. Residents and businesses that depend on the lake for water and livelihoods remember docks left high and dry.

"We haven't recovered from it yet," said Don Haynie, owner of Custom Dock Systems Inc. in Anderson. "There were places you couldn't use a dock. Most people, when the water went to that level, lost their reason to use the lake and left. Our second-home business totally dried up."

Haynie said business started to improve this year, and then when the lake reached a 6-foot low, "Our phones stopped ringing and people stopped walking in our office. When the lake drops, our business drops."

David Freeman, owner of Portman Marina, feared that he'd lose his business in 2008 between the drought and recession. He continues to worry about how "the ongoing and competing needs" of users upstream and downstream can be better managed.

Hartwell is at the upper end of the Savannah system, and "once it's gone, it's gone. We can't replenish it," Freeman said. If Hartwell is managed with "a conservation approach," everyone benefits. "If water is churned out to the sea, we'll see problems on an ongoing basis."

The corps manages the three-lake system under a plan that includes specific triggers that call for reduced flow as the lake drops to specified levels.

Management of the lake is designed to meet specified needs — power production, flood control, water quality and supply, recreation and wildlife protection, Birdwell said.

The economic value of the lake and the jobs it provides at businesses from boat storage facilities and dock builders to restaurants and retailers aren't considered in lake management decisions.

"The current authorizing legislation doesn't include economics as a purpose of the dam project," Birdwell said.

A comprehensive study is required before policy can change. "That way we have scientific information that will back up any decisions we make on the basin," Birdwell said.

The study has been on hold. The corps recently received funding for a second phase of the study and agreed to let South Carolina and Georgia make in-kind contributions due to the economy.

However, financially strapped South Carolina hasn't been able to contribute its share, even in-kind.

Duncan said his staff is monitoring the process "to make sure this study takes place."

Economic impact "needs to be considered as one of the lake's purposes and I am willing to work to that end, but that could take years," Duncan said.

Currently he is focused on encouraging the corps to drop releases from the Thurmond dam in cooler months to 3,800 cubic feet per second or possibly 3,600 cubic feet per second before the lakes reach drought trigger level 3, when the current plan calls for lower releases.

Currently the lakes are at a level 2, which allows releases up to 4,000 cubic feet per second.

"We have been blessed with an abundance of water in South Carolina, but the last 10 years have been trying," Duncan said.

"We need to do everything we can to conserve and protect our water resources and use them wisely. I believe this is possible if we are willing to work together. It is critical that we keep the water at the fullest level possible. Our lakes are the reservoirs for the whole river."

Hartwell, one of the five most visited U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes, is a magnet for residents, visitors and controversy. It's been that way since the beginning.

"It turned out to be quite a battle," said U.S. District Judge G. Ross Anderson Jr., who as a young lawyer argued for the project that opponents feared would turn Clemson University — then Clemson College — into "a vast mud flat."

Two legendary South Carolina statesmen clashed over it. U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond, with Clemson trustees, initially opposed it. U.S. Sen. Olin D. Johnson argued for it.

"Thurmond eventually came around," Anderson said, and the Clemson coffer dams were part of the compromise.

The Hartwell dam, seven miles downstream from where the Seneca and Toxaway rivers met, helped provide electricity to the then-rural area and resolved flooding problems, Birdwell said.

Today Upstate residents enjoy the lake for boating and bass fishing and as a source of drinking water. Lake lots are prime real estate.

"We consider it as a major resource. It's a recreation amenity, an economic resource and an amazing quality of life amenity," said Sharon Richardson, planning director for the city of Clemson.

"We have to take care of it."

