Low lake levels expected to go lower

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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CLEMSON — It didn't take long for Mike Kesler to realize he had done something terribly wrong to his pontoon boat while boating on Lake Hartwell last month.

"We were just cruising along and before I knew it, our pontoon boat was stopped in the middle of the water," Kesler said. "And I'm not talking about my motor stopping. I mean we stopped so fast that you would have sworn we drove up on land."

Even though Kesler considered himself to be in a well-traveled area of the lake, the top of a small island became exposed and it stopped his boat almost immediately as he tried to pass over it.

It's a common problem, according to Zach Harkness, chief park ranger for the Army Corp of Engineers.

"Right now, Hartwell is down about 8 and a half feet," he said. "Within our 10-week projection, that number is expected to go up by another 4 feet or so."

According to Harkness, in addition to the water that the Army Corp of Engineers releases downstream to the Savannah River Basin, the reason the lake is low comes from a myriad of explanations.

"Most people don't realize that a high percentage of the water loss is due to evaporation. It accounts for a much higher percentage than the water we release on a weekly basis," he added. "These high temperatures early in the year have already started to cause a problem. Hartwell sits on a lot of surface area and when it stays hot, the water doesn't stick around."

Lakes Keowee and Jocassee, however, are still close to full pond as of their last measurement on May 13, which will make navigating them much easier.

The Upstate itself is in a severe drought and Harkness said our area is well below the normal rainfall average for the month and the year.

However, that could all change with a significant weather event like Tropical Storm Beryl that made landfall on the South Carolina coast last week.

"If we can be lucky enough for one like that to stay around the Upstate, we could come out of this problem soon," he added.

While the low lake levels are making navigating and enjoying Lake Hartwell trying, Harkness said it's important to keep things in perspective.

"Around three years ago, Hartwell was down well over 20 feet," he said. "And even when we were in a drought in 2010, from December of that year to April of 2011, we had enough rain to put us over full pond again. It not only filled our lakes, but it recharged the ground water, which allowed for a lot of runoff into the lake as well. We need an event like that and it will put us on the path to recovery again."

When it comes to feeling comfortable on the lake, Harkness said that the Army Corp of Engineers marks every low-level hazard in the main channel of Hartwell, along with any hazard that runs from any public boat landing leading to the main channel.

"It's important to go slow and be cautious if you travel outside of the main channel," Harkness added. "Between stumps, trees and other hazards, people are having to deal with things they don't normally have to deal with when it's full. It may seem obvious, but it's crucial to be extra aware now and throughout the summer."

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Around the nearly 900 acres that is Lake Hartwell, many boat docks are standing on solid ground instead of water. The low levels are not expected to rise anytime soon.