Oconee lakes showing effects of drought



Receding Lake Hartwell waters from a moderate drought expose more of the beach at the Clemson Marina in Oconee County.

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SENECA — Recent rain from the remnants of Tropical Storm Lee helped ease the state's drought level, but the lakes in Oconee County remain below their target levels for this time of year.

Scott Harder, a hydrologist with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, told members of the state's Drought Response Committee that Keowee, Jocassee and Hartwell lakes in Oconee are "among the hardest hit by drought."

Harder told the group that all stream-flow gauges in the Upper Savannah River are approaching critical flows for this time of year.

The U.S. Geological Survey monitoring well in Oconee County has been declining steadily, Harder said.

The Drought Response Committee met via teleconference Thursday and agreed to up the designation of all counties in the state to moderate drought status.

The current Friends of Lake Keowee Society newsletter points out that the drought's impact on the lakes would look bleaker had Jocassee and Keowee not recorded above-normal rain fall in March of 7 and 4.5-inches, respectively.

FOLKS estimates that Keowee dropped approximately 1.5 feet during the summer when precipitation and evaporation from lake surfaces are taken into account.

Jason Ward, a hydrologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers told the Drought Response Committee that the Savannah River Basin was upgraded to the second stage of drought on Aug. 31.

"Basin inflows are approximately 5 percent to 30 percent of normal for the 30-day average," Ward said.

South Carolina and the entire Southeast is three years removed from a prolonged severe drought that drastically curtailed activity on the lakes and resulted in economic losses.

Looking ahead, state officials are still concerned of another active wildfire season going into fall.

Daryl Jones with the state Forestry Commission said the drought continues to pose problems.

"We're still concerned about conditions around the state over the next several weeks," Jones said.

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