Pickens council urges better management of lake levels

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
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SENECA — Councilman Trey Whitehurst requested that Pickens County Council strike an item about Lake Hartwell rules and regulations from the log last week.

The education, recreation, health, welfare and planning committee recommended removing item No. 7 from council's log "with the direction for this to be reviewed and addressed again in the future," the committee's Nov. 14 report said.


Whitehurst

"I strongly believe lake levels are mismanaged by the (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), but basically they tell us, 'That's too bad,'" committee chairman Whitehurst said.

Expecting the Corps to make no changes in the near future, a frustrated Whitehurst urged community members to take matters into their own hands.

"I can just say call your congressmen, complain to the governor," he said.

Pickens County Council drafted and sent a letter to the Corps in August that expresses council's concerns over management of water levels during the Upstate's current drought.

"I am writing to you at the direction of the Pickens County Council, which wishes to express its concern over the fluctuation of water levels in Lake Hartwell," county administrator Gerald Wilson said in the letter. "According to media reports, the Hartwell Reservoir entered drought stage management status in July. Based on our community's experience during the last drought cycle, we are requesting your assistance in maintaining lake levels in Lake Hartwell in a safe, uniform and predictable manner."

The Journal reported in July that the lakes in the upper Savannah River Basin, which includes Hartwell, entered Drought Level 1 due to dry conditions. The Corps said in a news release that Lake Thurmond dipped below 326 feet above mean sea level, which activated the Corps' drought management plan to limit the discharge rate from the Thurmond Dam.

"Once either Hartwell Lake or Thurmond Lake enters drought conditions, water managers reduce releases from Thurmond Dam until Hartwell and Thurmond rise 2 feet above the trigger," the news release said.

Wilson characterized the Corps' decisions as less than helpful.

"Called the state's most economically and geographically diverse area, Pickens County and the bordering Blue Ridge region provide a beautiful backdrop for natural attractions such as Table Rock State Park, scenic Highway 11 and the S.C. Botanical Garden," Wilson said. "However, our scenic vistas and tourism attractants are marred by seemingly arbitrary decisions of the Corps, as lake levels are dropped precipitously and recreational and tourism opportunities are limited."


Wilson

The committee recommended drafting the letter on July 25, the same day that the Corps' made its news release available. After a unanimous vote to proceed with the letter following its drafting, council sent the letter to Commanding Officer of the Savannah District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Col. Marvin Griffin, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, the Lake Hartwell Homeowners Association and Third District U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan.

Dated Aug. 19, the letter encouraged the Corps to create "flexible strategies" to use real-time data and local conditions for monitoring and adjusting Lake Hartwell flows. The letter asked the Corps to "not rely on arbitrary procedures that are not cognizant of the specific needs of our water basin," adding that "economic, recreational and environmental impacts in our area be treated with equal concern as afforded the lower reaches of the basin."

Corps Commanding Brigadier Gen. David Turner responded to council in a letter dated Sept. 19. Turner said that the Savannah River Basin reservoirs were designed to "mitigate periods of drought for the entire Savannah River Basin" in addition to reducing the impacts of floods.

"However, striking this balance becomes difficult during sustained periods of below-average rainfalls," Turner said, adding that Hartwell's rainfall was below average for seven months in a row. "The flow reductions as outlined in the (Director of Military Programs) manual have allowed for a slower decline of the reservoirs during this drought. Until we receive continuous rainfall over the entire basin, the Hartwell and Thurmond reservoirs will continue to decline."

The basin entered Drought Level 2 in September, when Thurmond Lake dipped below 323.97 feet above mean sea level, according to a second news release.

"When one of the reservoirs enters a drought level, the other two also enter that drought level," the news release said.

The Journal reported recently that Oconee County remains in a severe drought. Officials said that the drought played a major role in the Pinnacle Mountain Fire, which is now 100 percent contained after burning through 10,623 acres, according to a South Carolina Forestry Commission news release.

"Even though we've had some recent widespread rainfall across the state, it's not enough to improve the drought conditions that currently exist," National Weather Service senior hydrologist Leonard Vaughan said. "Even rain that is forecast in the near future would not be significant enough to make a big change. We need more frequent rainfall events to make a big dent in the current drought."

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