Plan may staunch lake losses

Corps considers slowing flow of water out of Hartwell during drought

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A new drought plan by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could have a major impact on the water levels at Lake Hartwell this spring even as the water level dips lower on the Upstate reservoir and forecasts call for a hot, dry summer that threatens to further purge water from the lake.

Lake Hartwell already faces a level seven feet below average heading into the summer, but changes to the corps' drought contingency plan could slow the flow of water from the reservoir downstream to other Savannah River projects like Lake Russell and Lake Thurmond.

Slowing the water flow out of Lake Hartwell during a drought would keep its water levels higher for longer and would slow the drop in the water level that affects water supply as well as recreational uses, water-related businesses and property values on the lake.

Heavy rain early in the week and showers forecast through the weekend would likely raise the water level at Lake Hartwell by just one or two inches, said Dennis Chastain, a member of the state's Drought Response Committee.

"Trying to get these reservoirs re-filled this time of year is like trying fill a bathtub with the drain open," Chastain said. "It's tough and really requires some kind of extraordinary event like the remnants of a tropical storm or hurricane. And that's just not going to happen this time of year."

The new plan would allow the corps to monitor flow from the Broad River into Lake Thurmond, giving it an earlier indication of how a drought is affecting

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the region's water flow, said Billy Birdwell, a corps' spokesman. The change would allow the corps to cut back sooner on the amount of water released from Lake Hartwell downstream during drought conditions, Birdwell said.

The change would affect flow mostly between Hartwell and Thurmond, the two larger lakes, Birdwell said.

"Russell has little flexibility, but we try to keep Hartwell and Thurmond balanced," he said.

Even with regular extended rains early in the winter months, the region's underground reservoirs didn't fill and its lake levels are already depleted going into the summer, Chastain said.

"When we get into an extreme drought situation, usually in the summer, and the rain stops, the only water we have to draw on is from these reservoirs," Chastain said. "That's why it concerns me so much to be starting the spring-summer season at so low levels."

Chastain said he supports any corps action to retain water in the Upper Savannah reservoirs like Lake Hartwell. He said that support must be balanced with an obligation to release some water to keep the flow going to produce electricity and maintain the fish habitat downstream.

The new plan is "commendable," because it would help the lake level at Lake Hartwell, but it doesn't go far enough, said Herb Burnham, president