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Proposed lower Lake Keowee level necessary, not a hindrance, says Duke Energy

Ray Chandler. Special to Independent Mail

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WALHALLA —Duke Energy doesn't want lower water levels for the Keowee-Toxaway project lakes, but a proposal for a lower minimum level balances the needs of area residents with the need to keep Oconee Nuclear Station running even in drought conditions, a Duke official said.

"The fact is that with normal water flow, nothing will change," Jeff Lineberger, Duke Energy's director of hydro strategy and licensing, told the Oconee County Council on Thursday.

Lineberger briefed the council on the status of Duke's relicensing agreement with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which includes a draft proposal that would set Lake Keowee's minimum level for the safe operation of the Oconee Nuclear Station at 790 feet above mean sea level instead of the current 795 feet. Full pool for the lake is 800 feet above mean sea level.

Duke Energy has outlined plans to modify the cooling water intake of the nuclear plant to allow for the new minimum.

More than 700 residents of lakefront homes and communities, however, have signed a petition opposing the proposed lower minimum, saying it will decrease the value of their properties.

The operating level of the lake would still be in the range of 795-800 feet above mean sea level, Lineberger said, but the new minimum would give Duke a wider margin to keep the plant operating in drought conditions while also keeping Duke's commitments to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to release water into Hartwell Lake, facilitating the downstream flow to the other Corps lakes and users of the Savannah River basin.

"Otherwise, we might have to shut down the plant during severe droughts and close off access to the lake," Lineberger said.

Dealing with droughts the last few years has imposed a new reality on the management of the lakes, the engineer said, and the proposed minimum is a key part of a balanced approach that would keep Lake Keowee at an adequate level while balancing the needs to maintain the watershed's downstream flow.

The Duke proposal, Lineberger said, would keep the nuclear station operating in severe droughts, support downstream water needs and allow continued regional economic growth. It also ensured lake access and other uses during droughts, he added.

Even in the worst-case drought scenario, he said, modeling projected that the lake would be 790-795 feet above mean sea level only 0.4 percent of the time, and even with a severe climate change scenario, the projections predicted the lake would be in that range only 1.8 percent of the time.

The new proposed minimum would also make no change in which adjoining properties are or are not considered waterfront properties, he said.

And since Duke is doing all it can to keep the lake levels up, he said, there are no plans for additional studies or for compensation.

"The fact is, no one can guarantee specific lake levels in a rainfall-dependent water system," he said.

Lineberger said a new operating agreement was in the works with the Corps of Engineers that would set the 790 feet above mean sea level as Lake Keowee's floor minimum, 15 feet higher than the current minimum. That would preserve Lake Keowee from the possible 15 feet of additional Corps-mandated releases in the event of a severe drought, he said. Lineberger said negotiations are expected to begin in earnest on the operating agreement in 2014.

The final relicensing agreement will be part of Duke Energy's relicensing application for the Keowee-Toxaway project. The application must be filed with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission by August 2014. The project was granted a 50-year license in 1966. The current license for the project expires in August 2016.

The relicensing process has been under way since 2009, with Duke Energy seeking the input of stakeholders such as local governments, conservation groups, property owners and others.

Duke's Keowee-Toxaway project includes the Bad Creek reservoir, Lake Jocassee and Lake Keowee.

Other surveys of the project done as part of the relicensing process have found no rare, threatened or endangered fish populations to be protected, and that the lake contained adequate levels of dissolved oxygen, according to the Keowee-Toxaway project's relicensing manager Jenn Huff.

Huff said surveys had found that erosion was taking two to three inches of shoreline a year, but the major causes were boat waves and wind-driven waves.

A new shoreline management plan to be part of the agreement will also mean lakefront property owners with docks will have to remove unencapsulated foam from their docks

within two years of the new license, Huff said, because pieces of foam breaking off and floating in the lake are a problem.

New leases will also be approved for 10 public access areas and programs will be put in place to promote safe boating and water safety.

The final agreement is expected to be finished and signed by November 2013.



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