Residents can expect summer water rules

Recent rains not enough to recharge watertable

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Mandatory water restrictions are being lifted and rain swollen streams are refilling Upstate lakes, bringing some relief before summer evaporation and water consumption put more demand on the lakes.

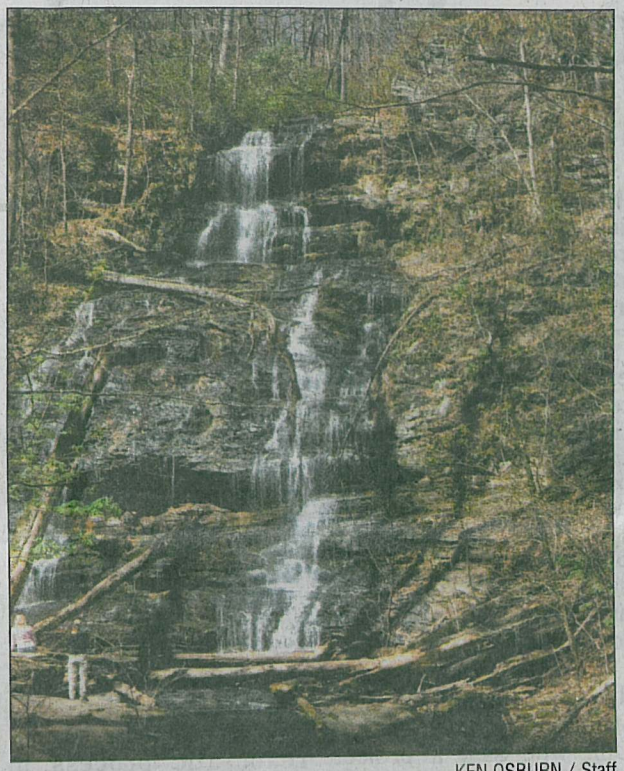
Upstate residents, however, can expect another cycle of water restrictions this summer unless tropical storms bring needed rainfall. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projections put Lake Hartwell at about the same level it was last year going into summer, said Billy Birdwell, a Corps spokesman.

Hartwell was 652 feet above mean sea level last May, eight feet below full pool, and the Corps currently is discharging no water from Hartwell to help reach that goal.

Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System that serves 14 water providers in Anderson and Pickens counties, said that should keep water above the system's intakes for another 12 months, based on last year's experience.

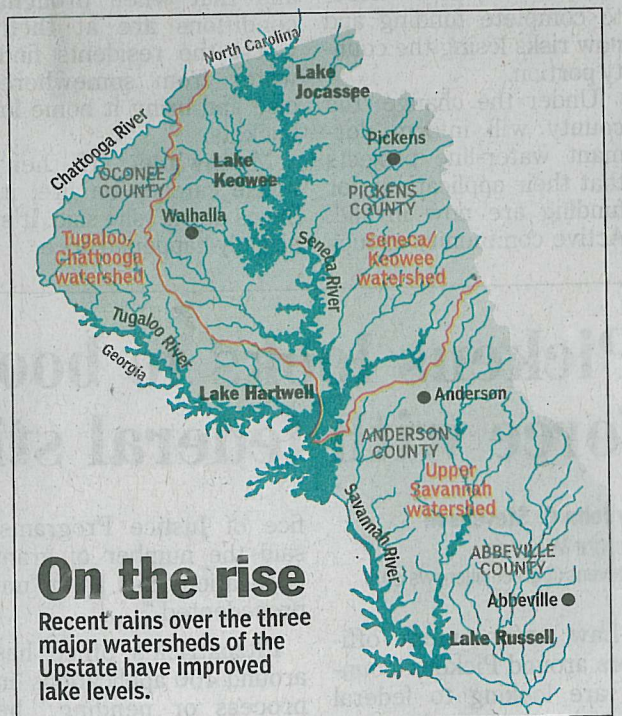
"The actions that were taken last year appeared to be relatively prudent,"

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KEN OSBURN / Staff

Station Cove Falls is a 60-foot waterfall in Oconee County.



On the rise

Recent rains over the three major watersheds of the Upstate have improved lake levels.

SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

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said Willett, who predicts a replay with voluntary and possibly renewed mandatory water restrictions unless tropical storms from the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean bring substantially more rain to the Upstate this year.

By returning the lakes to where they started last summer, state Climatologist Hope Mizzell said, "at least we know what to anticipate if drought of a similar severity continues."

If the drought is more severe, the impact will be greater, Mizzell said.

During the summer, lake levels will decline because of evaporation and water use. How much it declines depends on how high the evaporation, how high the water usage and the amount of rainfall, Mizzell said.

The current La Nina, which brings drier weather and warmer winters, is expected to weaken, but long-range models are providing no guidance for the Southeast this summer, Mizzell said.

Tropical systems, which can bring substantial rain, typically aren't a significant factor until August, and June and July remain a question mark, Mizzell said.

Groundwater recharge depends on winter and spring precipitation. Indications show that despite increased flow from heavy rains filling streams, the groundwater recharge has been insufficient to sustain them during the gaps between rain events.

Residents like a Fork Shoals woman who called Mizzell last Friday begging for a disaster declaration have had no relief. Eight wells have gone dry and area fire departments are affected, Mizzell said the woman told her.

An agricultural disaster declaration granted last summer through the U.S. Department of Agriculture doesn't help nonfarm homeowners or renters who no longer have drinking water, Mizzell said.

Although most providers have lifted mandatory restrictions, conservation should be taken seriously, Willett said.

"You don't have to wash a car with the water running. There's no need to water landscaping after a rain. Those are conservation measures we should follow all the time, and especially when the lake is down," Willett said.

Most of the regional system's 14 water providers that use Lake Hartwell water have dropped mandatory water restrictions and are asking for voluntary restrictions. Clemson City Council is expected to alter its drought ordinance criteria in order to follow suit when it meets on April 6, said City Administrator Rick Cotton.

New criteria would be based on factors including lake levels rather than drought status and would match criteria used by most other members of the regional system, Cotton said.

"Everyone who pulls out of the same intake should share the same restrictions," Cotton said.

Signs of drought will be seen when the Corps opens five campgrounds and day-use areas in South Carolina and one in Georgia for the season on April 1.

The Corps is opening Springfield Campground in Anderson County; Twin Lakes Campground, Singing Pines Day Use Area, and Twelve Mile Day Use Area in Pickens County; Fair Play Day Use Area in Oconee County; and Watsadlers Campground in Hart County, Ga.

The beaches will be usable but the swimming areas will be dry, said Jeanne Hodge, a Corps spokeswoman.

Higher up the Savannah River Basin, Lake Jocassee is up nearly six feet from its Dec. 3 low of 71.4 feet, according to Duke Energy data.

Jocassee was 77.2 feet and Lake Keowee was 95.2 feet Friday on Duke's system that measures 100 feet as full pool.

Keowee doesn't fluctuate much because Duke can draw on Jocassee to maintain a suitable level for Oconee Nuclear Station.

Duke has been making releases from Keowee to Hartwell when there's rain and there is water to send, said Duke spokeswoman Sandra Magee.

The groundwater is recharging gradually, but the ground is so dry it soaks up the rain and limits the runoff to the lakes, Magee said.