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Last March, David Freeman, owner-operator of Portman Marina on Lake Hartwell, was nearly forced out of business. Earlier this month, Adam Roach was able to look out over a much fuller Lake Hartwell.

Residents fear tourism engine could run dry

Now, Corps cannot use economic impact to help set Hartwell levels

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CLEMSON — David Freeman nearly lost his marina business when Lake Harwell dropped to an unprecedented low last winter, yet an Army Corps of Engineers commander said economic impact isn't a factor in lake management decisions.

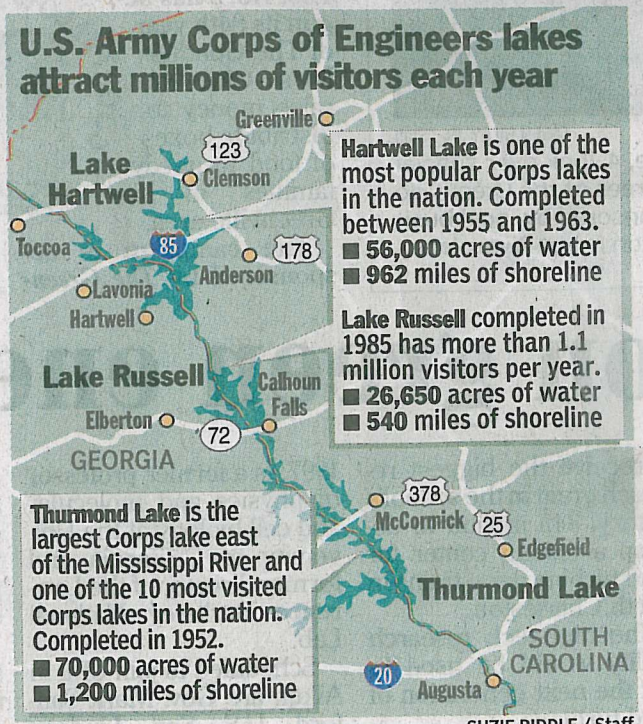
"I don't have any authority to help balance the economy," said Brig. Gen. Todd Semonite, commander of the Corps' South Atlantic Division. "So as much as the economic interests of the area are a great concern to me as a taxpayer, I have no authority by Congress to balance that."

U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, whose district includes Lake Hartwell, has talked to Semonite and is researching options to change that, said Emily Tyner, Barrett's spokeswoman.

"It is very important that the Corps of Engineers considers the impact their decisions have on small businesses and the surrounding economies," Tyner said.

Congress requires the Corps to manage Lake

See LAKE on page 5A



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

LAKE

FROM PAGE 1A

Hartwell for six specific purposes: water supply, water quality, navigation, recreation, hydro power and flood control. Economic impact isn't on the list, Semonite said.

"I am prevented by law of taking that variable and adding that into the equation," Semonite said. "As much as I'd like to listen to all of the concerns and be able to act on all the concerns, I only have the authority to act on certain of those concerns."

"How do you untie his hands?" Freeman asked. "Six counties count on it for tourism and recreation. Tourism and recreation are tied to the economic well being of the area."

Barrett "understands that the Corps is limited in how much they are allowed to deviate from their guidelines. Therefore, the congressman will continue to weigh all the options available," Tyner said.

When asked by *The Greenville News* if those options include legislation in Congress to add economic impact, Tyner said, "All options are on the table."

Mike Gray, chairman of the Lake Hartwell 660 Coalition, contends the Corps continually considers economics — in terms of producing power.

If lake management policies were changed to restrict downstream flow sooner in a drought, the lake could be managed in a way that would "generate power, keep lake levels up and make everybody happy," Gray said.

Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association, said the economic value of the lake primarily comes from recreation, which is a stated purpose for the reservoir.

"If there wasn't a recreation-type draw, I don't think we'd have anywhere near the economy based on the lake that we have now, and that's true of any lake," Burnham said.

"In that sense it's covered because they do recognize recreation. They do put up docks and ramps and campgrounds and all the other stuff that brings money in from recreation purposes."

The Corps of Engineers and the six counties bordering Lake Hartwell — Anderson, Pickens and Oconee in South Carolina and three in Georgia, have budgeted $100,000 each for an economic impact study by Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute.

The study will investigate the effect of lake levels on the economy around Lake Hartwell.

"It will give us a good arguing point to keep (the level of Hartwell) up for economic reasons," Burnham said.

Semonite said the study will "help inform us of what I call second- and third-order effects, but it's not going to have the same primacy as other factors that Congress told us we have to do."

It will become part of a Comprehensive Study the Corps is conducting of the Savannah River Basin, Semonite said.

The study was shelved for years because the Corps couldn't get funding for a second phase. President Barack Obama recently approved the federal funding, Semonite said.

Now, South Carolina and Georgia have to fund their matching shares. That

could be challenging in the present economy, and Burnham is concerned.

"The study has to be done before there's a good solid basis to change the drought plan," he said.

"Water is going to be more and more of an issue. If we want to continue putting plants like Boeing in the state, we better have good sources of water," Burnham said.

"And we're also concerned about the issue of Atlanta someday needing to find some more sources of water. Lake Hartwell is not that far away."