

PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

David Freeman, owner of Portman Marina, said he almost had to close during the drought.

Residents take issue with lake-level impact

Recent research could hurt plans to keep water levels higher, they say

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CLEMSON — Lake Hartwell residents and business owners say recent research that found little impact from low lake levels on the local economy was too broad and downplays losses during the recent drought.

And they are taking action in its wake.

"It minimizes the value of the lake," said Herb Burnham, president of the more than 2,000-member Lake Hartwell Association, who fears the results of the research could taint efforts to keep more water in Upstate lakes. Association leaders are working a position paper to dispute the scope and conclusions.

Col. Jeff Hall, commander of the Savannah District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the taxpayer-funded $211,522 study used "the data rather than interviewing the operations on the lake" due to limited funding. "There was a vision for a second phase" for interviews, but no resources to "drill down" to the more localized level, he said.

State Rep. Don Bowen, a Townville Republican, said he and some Georgia lawmakers hope to secure some of the revenue the federal treasury receives from power produced by the five Hartwell dam generators to fund more focused research that could deflate the impact of the Strom Thurmond Institute study.

"Since that water belongs to the two states, we should get a portion. We don't own the equipment but we own the water," Bowen said.

The economic impact on the six counties on the lake was less than 1 percent, according to the recently released study by Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute — but try telling that to David Freeman, owner of Portman Marina.

The study looks at "the big picture and not necessarily the small picture," said Freeman, who could barely make payroll and considered closing the Anderson restaurant and marina complex that employs about 100 people as the lake dropped to an unprecedented 22-foot low in 2008.

The study included all of the six-county area, not just areas near the lake, and included retail sales of general merchandise unrelated to tourism or recreation, Freeman said, yet it ignored the long-term impact on tourism, which takes time to rebuild, population growth, and the value of a natural resource he compares to a national park.

"It just misses the whole target of what it is to have a beautiful resource of this sort that improves our quality of life on a daily basis," Freeman said. "It's not fair to say if things get bad here people can just go to another lake."

Jeff Allen, director of the South Carolina Water Resources Center at the Strom Thurmond Institute and principal author of the study, which included Anderson, Pickens and Oconee counties in South Carolina and three Georgia counties, said it

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did what it was intended to do: study the impact on the total area.

"I'm not taking anything away from anyone who has a business focused on lake and suffered," Allen said. "We are certain it hurts individual businesses. When their story is told you only get a part of the story. It's a valid part of the story but we wanted to look at the impact on the counties as a whole."

The scope of the study was agreed on in advance by the six counties and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, all of which provided funding, Allen and Hall said. The Corps of Engineers paid half of the cost, and the counties split the rest based on shoreline miles.

The study analyzed gross retail sales in nine areas: gas stations, autos, bars, restaurants, boating stores, general merchandise, miscellaneous general merchandise, sporting goods and groceries.

Feeling the impact

"I know that businesses have closed. I know people have not been able to sell their houses. I know people have lost jobs because of this and I understand their frustration," Allen said.

"The good news is that the county economies appear to be fairly robust and diversified enough" to withstand the impact of dropping lake levels "without getting into dire straits."

That's little comfort to Don Haynie, owner of Custom Dock Systems Inc., a third-generation family business in Anderson that lost 50 percent of gross sales in 2008 and had to lay off 17 of 24 employees.

"We just had to hang on and luckily we were able to do that," said Haynie, whose father started the business in 1968. "Every major dip in the graph of gross sales is a drought year, so it is directly related."

The impact fell on "people that depend on the lake and the properties and the businesses around here that make a living on the lake," Burnham said. "The people on the other side of the county didn't lose their jobs because of it."

The total impact on the six counties as a whole "was not a big deal. It's the people on the lake whose property value went down, the real estate people who got hurt, that's where we need to look," Burnham said.

Mike Massey, a Lake Hartwell Association board member, fears ramifications of the Strom Thurmond Institute study could negatively affect an upcoming comprehensive study of the full Savannah River Basin.

Money again is a limiting issue. The Corps "is cash-strapped," Hall said.

After years of requests, the Corps recently received $490,000 for a comprehensive study. The Corps is helping the states to find "appropriate in-kind services" for their matches due to their own budgetary shortfalls. It's not enough money for a full comprehensive study, Hall said. So only the drought management piece will be done.

Conflicting needs

The comprehensive study will include the entire river basin, from Upstate lake level concerns to protection of aquatic species and support for nuclear power facilities downstream and keeping saltwater out of drinking water and freshwater marshes on the coast, Hall said.

The drought management piece isn't enough to change policy set by Congress. It could enable some temporary adaptive management tools used in the recent drought to become permanent in times of severe drought, Hall said.

"People believe we can just change the levels to whatever we want to change. That is not the case," Hall said.