Runway project in holding

Officials still working to resolve stormwater runoff into Lake Hartwell

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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SENECA — Completion of a $4.2 million runway expansion project at the Oconee County Regional Airport is officially in a holding pattern.

On Friday, Airport Director Kevin Short admitted the project, which would give the county its first coveted 5,000-foot strip to allow fat-cat executives' jets to land here, is no longer on target to meet its original completion date of mid-August.

For more than a month, project engineers have been scurrying to meet modifications to the airport's stormwater pollution prevention plan requested by the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC).

Short said airport engineers are still working with DHEC officials to resolve all the stormwater runoff issues.

"We have to meet DHEC's requirements so we don't have off-site sedimentation," Short said.

The silt is flowing into Lake Hartwell, which is only about 1,200 feet away from the airport at its closest point

The project contractor, Plateau Excavation Inc. of Austel, Ga., only had a skeleton crew at the worksite on Friday, and those workers were engaged primarily on erosion control.

Workers already have carved out a third water-retention basin, added a stormwater pipe and silk fencing to mitigate DHEC erosion control issues.

"When water drops 100 feet down these slopes there has to be a way to slow it down," Short said.

The additional work on stormwater controls is adding to the cost of the project, but Short said the Federal Aviation Administration would foot the bill.

Talbert & Bright, the engineering firm overseeing the runway extension, has assured county officials that the FAA has approved using its contingency reserve funds for the project (typically 15 percent of the total project cost) to cover the additional expenses.

Short said Talbert & Bright submitted its mitigation plan to DHEC a month ago and hopes to have a final resolution in the coming days.

Now Short is pushing the goal line on when the runway project could be completed.

"I'm still optimistic we'll have it done for the start of the Clemson football season," Short said.

The problem with stormwater runoff from the airport surfaced in early February when a nearby homeowner filed a complaint with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which controls Lake Hartwell. The Corps turned the complaint over to DHEC.

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Until the runway is extended to 5,000 feet at the Oconee County Regional Airport, only smaller aircraft will continue to land and take off. Stormwater runoff problems are delaying the runway extension project.

Engineers spokesman Billy Birdwell said the Corps has worked closely with DHEC and the Corps' Charleston District, which oversees Clean Water Act regulations in South Carolina, on a solution to the airport's stormwater-runoff problem.

"We support DHEC's and Charleston District's efforts to have the airport draw up plans to remove sediment from Corps property," Birdwell said.

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