Study: Low lake didn't dry up economy

Some Hartwell residents dispute findings that drought had minor impact

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The economies of the six counties surrounding Lake Hartwell saw only minor setbacks due to falling reservoir levels during the major drought of 2007-2008, according to a study by the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson University.

The estimated economic impact of low lake levels on the value of goods and services produced in the region was less than 1 percent over the 21-month period, according to the study.

"This study demonstrates that Hartwell Lake is not a primary economic driver in the region and provides evidence that the six counties surrounding Hartwell Lake have sufficient economic breadth and depth to weather prolonged low lake levels without realizing substantial declines in their economic well-being," the study states.

Released late Tuesday, the study was initiated after Lake Hartwell plunged to an unprecedented 22-foot low during the recent drought and was paid for by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and six counties on Lake Hartwell — Pickens, Anderson and Oconee and three in Georgia.

"The estimated economic impacts of low water levels in Lake Hartwell, while measurable, are small when compared to the overall level of economic activity in these six counties," the study states.

Many local residents feel the impact was far greater.

"I'd have to argue with the fact that it's not a major impact economically on the area," said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association, who added that he wants to read the study before commenting further.

Dan Marett, past commodore of the Western Carolina Sailing Club, said, "Looking at all the industry that's tied to the water close to this lake, it definitely impacted those businesses. That, and the economy, really hurt them."

Local residents may have chosen other local activities or visited Lake Keowee instead of Lake Hartwell, the study said.

"These results provide support for the theory that Lake Keowee, which has a more stable water level than Hartwell Lake, is in direct competition with Hartwell Lake as a recreation destination," the study states.

The study found "statistically significant relationships between recreation use, real estate sales, gross retail sales and water levels" in Lake Hartwell.