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Summer rains do little to help lakes

By Joey Holleman
The State

While summer rains improved drought conditions in much of the state, the Savannah River basin remains seriously dry.

The basin's major lakes are well below their long-term average levels for late September — Jocassee by 14 feet, Hartwell by 7.5 and Thurmond by 8 feet.

"We're about out of the boat-launching business," said Doug Young, who lives in Chickasaw Point on Lake Hartwell. Many boat ramps on the lake now end before the water begins.

The official drought status is severe for five South Carolina counties and moderate for nine more, all in the northwestern portion of the state. The rest of the state is in an incipient drought, which is less severe.

When the state Drought Response Committee meets Thursday, it likely will decide to improve or remove drought designations for much of the state. Conditions in the Savannah River basin, however, didn't improve over the summer.

On the positive side, the Savannah lakes managed to hold their own after entering the summer at near-record lows, said state climatologist Hope Mizzell.

From May 1 through mid-September, Lake Hartwell dropped about 4 feet — to 648 feet from 652 —but that's the normal drop during the summer months. And that's better than the last major drought in 2008, when the lake began the summer at about 652 and dropped to 645 by late September on the way to 637 feet in December.

"It's not as bad as 2008, but it's moving in the wrong direction," Mizzell said.

When the lake falls below 646 feet, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers begins Level 3 drought operations, which reduce flow out of the dams throughout the Savannah system and put limitations on water users downstream. The corps projects the system will reach Level 3 in November.

Only a major rain-producer will change the situation in the next few months. Hurricane Isaac at one point was projected to move over the mountains and dump up to 14 inches in the area. Alas, Isaac went north instead of northeast, and the area got only a couple inches.

The next best chance for the Savannah lakes to refill is in the winter. Rain is more beneficial in the winter, Mizzell said. The moisture is less likely to evaporate, and vegetation goes dormant in the winter and uses less water. In addition, water demand for pools, lawns and farms goes down in the winter.

Winter rains are crucial. Slightly above-normal rainfall in December 2008 and March 2009 pulled the area out of the 2008 drought. Below-normal rainfall last winter, including a bone-dry February, contributed to the current problem.

"We could recover in the winter, but it depends on winter rainfall," Mizzell said.