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A boater cruises across Lake Keowee by South Cove Park recently. All restrictions on using lake water to irrigate lawns have been lifted thanks to recent rains that have lake levels in the area near normal.

Water restrictions lifted at lakes

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SENECA — For the first time in more than 15 months, residents along Lake Keowee and Lake Jocassee can use the lakes to water their grass without restrictions.

Recent rains have improved lake storage at the two lakes as well as others in the Keowee-Toxaway River Basin to allow the regional drought response plan to drop to Stage 0, according to Erin Culbert, Duke Energy spokeswoman. It is one level short of normal stage and requires Duke Energy officials to monitor conditions.

Culbert said the stage is an improvement over the previous Stage 2 level, which had been in place since January 2012. That stage had mandatory water conservation requirements and allowed those living near the affected lakes to irrigate using lake water only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Under the new stage, there are no restrictions for using lake water for irrigation.

"We really appreciate the support of our lake neighbors while the restrictions have been in place for almost a year and a half," Culbert said.

Culbert said recent rainfall, particularly the weekend of May 4-6, resulted in higher lake levels. Jocassee, which is currently just less than 3 feet below capacity, has gained 10 feet of storage since April. Jocassee was 25 feet below capacity at one point last year. Keowee is currently 4 feet below capacity, according to a Duke Energy website.

In order to return to normal stage, Culbert said the lakes must rise to 90 percent of remaining usable storage. Currently the local lakes are at 83.5 percent.

Because lakes Jocassee and Keowee are upstream of U.S. Army Corps (USACE) of Engineers reservoirs, the Keowee-Toxaway regional drought response plan is linked to USACE drought levels. USACE drought levels improved dramatically this week from even more rain in the middle and lower Savannah River Basin, which triggered the upstream improvement to Stage 0.

"The regional drought response plan is a most important tool in the way we propose managing water resources in dry conditions. Having a plan with clearly defined triggers that is nimble and able to respond appropriately to changing conditions is key," said Steve Jester, Duke vice president of Water Strategy, Hydro Licensing & Lake Services. "Receiving substantial rainfall this spring helps position the water storage in these reservoirs better for the summer months, when evaporation and required water releases can cause it to decline."

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