

Water-use cuts laid at

Limiting release earlier could have averted restrictions now, experts say

By Anna Simon

Clemson bureau
asimon@greenvillenews.com

Residents throughout Upstate communities are being asked to stop washing their cars and to take shorter showers and generally throttle back on the amount of water they use.

Why?

Is it a worse-than-expected drought? Not really,

according to experts who have predicted dry weather for months.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which governs Lake Hartwell and its water levels, may have made mistakes in how it managed lake levels during the summer — leading to today's voluntary restrictions, which could affect jobs and livelihoods, experts told GreenvilleOnline.com.

ne.com.

Letting less water out of corps' lakes earlier in the drought would have prevented the situation, said Scott Willett, executive director of the Anderson Regional Joint Water System.

The corps recently cut releases from its Upstate lakes at the Thurmond Dam, citing predictions for a dry winter.

Had that same reduction been implemented 100 days ago, nearly 13 billion gallons of water — equal to a 21-month supply of water

— would have been saved, Willett said.

The current restrictions are voluntary. Willett worries that if drought drives lakes lower and mandatory conservation measures are required, people such as landscapers will lose jobs.

It helps to use water wisely, "but don't impact the economy, Times are hard. Small changes in river management are much more effective at saving water," Willett said.

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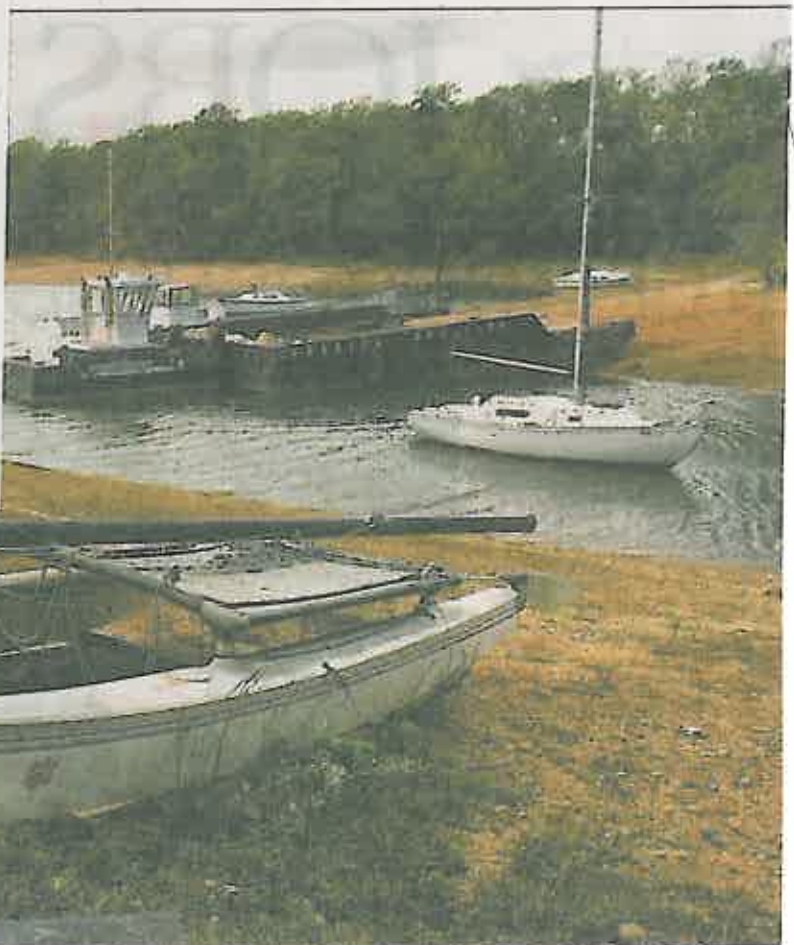
corps' door

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Lake Hartwell is near a record low, leaving this sailboat grounded near Seneca Creek Landing. KEN OSBURN/STAFF



Lake Hartwell water levels are nearing a record low, and some blame water released downstream for part of the problem. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

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Billy Birdwell, a corps spokesman, said the corps operated according to a drought plan that was created "with input from state and federal resource agencies and public stakeholders from throughout the basin."

The plan "sets the points where we reduce outflows and by how much we reduce them," Birdwell said.

Cuts are made "in a tiered manner based on drought severity because not all droughts turn into record-breaking ones," Birdwell said.

Dramatic cuts early in drought would "cause unnecessary harm to the environment and unneeded suffering for downstream users," Birdwell said.

Water providers, including Clemson, Clemson University, Powdersville and Greenville, recently asked customers to conserve water as the drought continues and lake levels fall.

Lake Hartwell is 8.4 feet below full pond, and Lake Jocassee is nearly 25 feet below full pond, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Duke Energy data.

"Water releases from Lake Keowee and Lake Jocassee have occurred in order to maintain water levels downstream in Lake Hartwell, so the effects of the dry weather are more dramatic in Lake Jocassee," said David Bereskin, chief executive officer of Greenville Water System, which draws part of its water from Keowee.

The Anderson regional system draws 20 million gallons a day from Lake Hartwell to supply 14 water systems in Pickens and Anderson counties. That same amount — an entire day's demand — shoots downstream from the Thurmond dam in less than 12 minutes, Willett said.

The corps made earlier cuts in July and again in August based on its drought plan as lake levels fell. The recent cut brings releases from the lakes to the low end of the range the

plan allows, said Stan Simpson, a water manager with the Savannah District.

The corps gathers water in its lakes in the rainy season so it's in reserve for drier months, Birdwell said.

"We want to avoid putting the downstream ecosystem and human needs under the stress of the most severe drought level every time a mild to moderate rainfall shortage occurs," Birdwell said.

A comprehensive study of needs along the entire river basin is required in order to change the current plan. The problem is money.

The corps recently received its funding, and the states of South Carolina and Georgia, because of tight budgets, were allowed to pay their share with in-kind contributions.

However South Carolina can't pay its share, even in-kind.

"The state of South Carolina needs to find a way," Willett said. "Water resource planning is important now, and it is going to be more important every

passing day. And not just on the Savannah."

The corps is working with South Carolina and non-governmental organizations to help find funding, Birdwell said.

"We keep looking to the

corps to fix the problem after we've already gotten into the problem, and they put a Band Aid on it because it's all that they can do," said Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association. "The

study has to be completed before we can make permanent changes."

U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan, whose 3rd Congressional District includes the Upper Savannah, said he's been "in constant communication" with the Governor's Office, state agencies and the corps to resolve roadblocks to funding the study.

The corps recently reduced water releases "on our request, but unfortunately that's the most the corps can do by law without having a study in place," Duncan said.

The study "is the best way to solve this problem in the short term. When addressing this drought, I'm keeping all options on the table," Duncan said.

Even as talks continue to find funding, Clemson University is poised to put computerized sensors along the entire length of the Savannah River from the mountains to the coast that will provide real-time data water managers could use.

Gene Eidson, who initiated Clemson's Intelligent

River project, said the corps has been involved since the beginning.

The technology "has a great opportunity to change some policy because for the first time they are going to have data at their fingertips within seconds," Eidson said.

The Intelligent River project will provide data "on an unprecedented scale," and includes tools to visualize the impact of any change, such as new industry or population growth, said Eidson and Jason Hallstrom, an associate professor at Clemson and principal investigator for a \$3 million grant from the National Science Foundation funding the project.

The question is whether the current drought plan would restrict the corps' ability to respond to the data without a change in the plan.

"This whole thing is so complicated and so administratively skewed in every way you can imagine and every time you take a step forward, you hit a roadblock and take a step back," Burnham said.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lakes attract millions of visitors each year



SUZIE RIDDLE/STAFF