

Corps confirms plans to maintain lake outflows in Savannah River Basin system

By Anna Mitchell

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As expected, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has decided to keep flows steady from the three-reservoir system that feeds into the Savannah River Basin.

Water elevation for Hartwell Lake, the highest of the three reservoirs, is at slightly more than 654 feet above sea level, or nearly three feet below full pool for this time of year.

Operators of the Corps' dams on the reservoirs had considered reducing flows from the system to 3,600 cubic feet per second through mid-February in an attempt to conserve water during what was projected to be a drier-than-normal winter. The Corps' drought plan typically calls for a more severe drought, with Hartwell down to 642 feet, for such a flow reduction to take place.

Ongoing environmental demands on water supply downstream, Corps leaders said this week, prompted a decision to cap the water going through the reservoir system at 4,200 cubic feet per second. The Corps launched an environmental assessment this past fall, required for any temporary reduction in flows, and requested public input on the plan last month.

The Corps used a similar approach to reduce flows temporarily in 2008, during what was a much more severe drought.

"We launched the EA this season as a proactive step to preserve water in reservoirs as we face a predicted dry winter and spring," said Col. Jeff Hall, commander of the Corps' Savannah River District, in a prepared statement. "This process highlights the complexities of managing the vast Savannah River system as a 'system.' "

Hartwell Dam Project Manager Virgil Hobbs predicted earlier this month such a decision would take place.

Despite snow and light rain this month, the region is still considered to be in an incipient drought, which had triggered the 4,200 cubic feet per second cap in fall 2010. If a drought is severe enough and the lake drops more than 35 feet, outflows are all but stopped — a scenario that came close to playing out in 2008.

No comprehensive study of the Savannah River Basin has determined exactly the minimum amount of water needed during the course of a year to sustain wildlife,

drinking water demands and the needs of industry downstream, among other concerns. Stakeholders agree the lack of data leaves them blind when advising the Corps regarding outflows.

Herb Burnham, president of the Lake Hartwell Association, said all other research on the basin should cease until the comprehensive study is fully funded and completed. The Corps won a nearly \$500,000 federal grant last year to launch the study but can't do so until Georgia and South Carolina pitch in another \$500,000 in in-kind labor or cash. Both states face tight budgets this year.

"It's our understanding that the only way something will change in a permanent way with regard to the basin's drought plan and how we manage water is after that comprehensive basin study is completed," Burnham said. "You can do all the studies and write letters and memos in great detail until you're blue in the face, but until that happens, the Corps can't move to do anything on a permanent basis."

A roughly \$220,000 study released this past fall that looked at how the level of water in Hartwell Lake affects the economy revealed little impact — a result met with great skepticism in the tourism and real estate sectors of the region.

"We shouldn't waste any more money on other studies and use it toward the comprehensive basin plan," Burnham said.

He wrote a letter in December on behalf of the Lake Hartwell Association — a group made up primarily of lakeside property owners — urging the Corps to reduce outflows from the lake as no evidence of harm to the environment emerged when flows were reduced dramatically in 2008.

Bill Sapp, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, penned a letter last month urging the Corps to do just the opposite, on the basis that the endangered short-nosed sturgeon could be harmed. He wrote on behalf of the Savannah Riverkeeper, Center for a Sustainable Coast and Upstate Forever, among other groups. Similar objections were raised by the Georgia chapter of the Sierra Club and the city administrator of Augusta, Ga.

"The Corps has provided no data ... that would support a finding of no significant impact as to fish and other aquatic organisms," Sapp wrote.

Sapp went on to describe the upstream migration patterns of the sturgeon, which rely on the river's Augusta Shoals for spawning.

Sapp said this week that the proposed deepening of the Savannah River and water supply needed to dilute industrial wastewater discharge further complicate the picture.

"It's really no time to come out with these environmental assessments on a yearly basis," Sapp said. "They've got to revisit the overall plan for the river and take the appropriate actions."

A comprehensive study of the watershed should take into account, Sapp said, current and future needs, especially with the planned expansion of the Vogtle Nuclear Power Plant near Augusta.

Lake property owners had become accustomed to a very full lake through the first half of 2010, with levels at 661.5 feet the first week of May — a full foot and a half above full pool. Hobbs has said high water coupled with wind and waves caused erosion of the shoreline in several spots — a mistake his staff did not want to repeat this year.

A dry and record-hot summer led the lake to drop two feet from June to July, another foot by the end of August and another foot and a half in September — a total of six feet since May. The lake has stood at a stable 654.3 feet since October.

Dam operators at the three lakes work together on flows to maintain lake levels as a system while supplying water to cities, industries and wildlife downstream.

In recent weeks, outflows from Thurmond have been around 4,000 cubic feet per second, well within the range operators set when the region is in an incipient drought, the Corps said. Meanwhile, power generation over the past three months at Hartwell has averaged about half what it was in June and July.



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