



Public Affairs Office

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CORPS, States, and Local Partners set drought management strategy for Roanoke Basin

As drought continues and deepens throughout the Southeast, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its State and Local partners have begun managing resources with long-term dry conditions in mind. "We don't see any significant rain in the forecast for November," said Terry Brown, Water Control Manager for the Corps' Wilmington District. "And long-term forecasts for the winter months aren't encouraging."

Over the past week, the Corps has stepped releases into the lower Roanoke River down to an average of 2000 cubic feet per second (cfs). "We have worked closely with our partners both upstream and downstream from the John H. Kerr Reservoir to design a workable strategy for the coming weeks," Brown said.

Two critical components on the Roanoke River system are the water supply intake for the city of Henderson, which is upstream of the Kerr Dam, and municipal and industrial facilities downstream. Henderson's water supply intake is threatened when Kerr Reservoir falls below 288 feet. Facilities as far downstream as the Plymouth, North Carolina, Weyerhaeuser plant could have difficulty operating because of salt water intrusion if flows go below 2000 cfs in the Roanoke River. These factors, plus the Corps' obligations to continue producing hydropower under contracts with the Southeastern Power Administration (SEPA), were primary considerations as partners worked together to come up with a strategy.

"All of our partners, along with the North Carolina Division of Water Resources and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality of Water Resources and others, have been working together. We think we've come up with a strategy that will safeguard the critical water supply intake for Henderson and ensure that the Weyerhaeuser plant can continue operations. SEPA has

been very helpful in adjusting to the drought situation as well. We have a win-win plan for the time being.”

Stakeholders anchoring upstream and downstream uses in the Roanoke System agreed. Mike Hicks, of the Henderson water authority, said his operation could continue as long as Kerr Reservoir is above 288 feet. “We are putting contingency plans in place right now,” Hicks said. Alternatives being considered by Henderson include augmented pumping capability, a water plant expansion connected with an alternate intake, and seeking outside help. The Henderson water system supports 40,000 users.

Martin Lebo, of Weyerhaeuser, said “at 2000 cfs, we see a brief salt water spike once or twice a week, but we have been operating through the spikes. It looks like this level of release will keep us in production.” His facility, one of the furthest downstream in a system that supports many other industrial users, employs well over 1,000 people.

“We are carefully watching flow levels,” said Dennis H. Treacy, Director of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. “We recognize that this is a difficult situation, and we will be working together with all the partners to help deal with it. We certainly encourage Virginians to do their best to conserve water at this time.”

Lower lake levels are also affecting recreation. Terry Ramsey, the Corps’ Project Operations Manager at John H. Kerr Reservoir, said that the Corps was taking steps to enhance safety and make some recreation sites more accessible. “We are looking at extending some of our boat ramps, we have installed depth markers at swim beaches, and we are using GPS/GIS technology to locate underwater obstacles and place buoys to enhance water safety for boaters.”

Brown explained the operating strategy. “We have reviewed the forecasts for rain and assessed inflows to the reservoir. The most probable projection for the lake is what we are following, rather than a ‘best case’ or ‘worst case’ scenario. Based on probabilities, releases at the level we’ve just established will take the lake down slowly to about 288 feet around January, and then we should begin to see a gradual rise in lake levels.” The management strategy could be changed, Brown explained, if weather conditions become either wetter or dryer than anticipated. Currently, inflows to Kerr Reservoir are running at about 17 percent of normal.

“Keep in mind that there are a number of reservoirs along the Roanoke River System, including Smith Mountain Lake, another Corps facility at Philpott Lake, Kerr Lake, Lake Gaston, and the Roanoke Rapids reservoir. Indications are that this drought could stretch on for months, and any reserves left in the basin can help us survive a severe drought.”

John Morris, Director of Water Resources for North Carolina, agreed with Brown. "We're very fortunate to have so many reservoirs in the Roanoke River Basin. The consequences of drought are serious, and we have to work together to make the best use of these water resources for all."

For information on water levels and drought reports for all five Wilmington District reservoirs, visit our web site at <http://epec.saw.usac.army.mil> or call (910) 251-4626 for more information. For conditions at John H. Kerr Lake, contact our Lake Level & Information Recording at 804-738-6371. This line also gives information on boat ramp access closures.