NEWS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS **BUILDING STRONG®**

For Immediate Release:
April 13, 2012
News Release No. 12-23

Contact:
Billy Birdwell, Public Affairs Officer, 912.652.5014/5279
billy.e.birdwell@usace.army.mil
After hours: 912-677-6039

Corps releases Draft Environmental Assessment for proposed update to Savannah River Basin drought plan

SAVANNAH, Ga. – Officials from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District have released for public comment a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) proposing an update to the way the Corps manages water in the Savannah River Basin during periods of drought.

The Corps' Drought Contingency Plan governs the amount of water the Corps discharges from the three-reservoir system during specified levels of drought (ranging from levels 1 through 4). Each drought level is based on a trigger level, or pool elevation, which varies seasonally in both Hartwell Lake and J. Strom Thurmond. The Corps measures water releases at Thurmond Dam which is the downstream project near Augusta, Ga. Hartwell adjusts its releases to stay in balance with Thurmond.

"This draft EA is designed to provide flexibility to the existing Drought Contingency Plan during extended drought periods," said Col. Jeff Hall, Corps' Savannah District Commander. "Our intent was to identify ways to respond earlier in a drought to conserve additional water storage, while balancing the impacts of drought on our other project purposes." This EA is expected to remain in place until the next step of the Savannah River Basin Comprehensive Study is completed which will update the drought plan based on the "drought of record," according to Hall.

The draft EA proposes the addition of an inflow-based drought indicator which would adjust releases as river inflows at the USGS Broad River gage at Bell decline. The Broad River is an unregulated tributary that flows into the Thurmond reservoir. According to the Draft EA, when 28-day average river inflows at the gage are less than or equal to 10 percent of the average historical flow rate, outflows from the Thurmond Dam would be reduced by an additional 200 cubic feet per second (cfs) or more based on the time of year, compared to the current drought plan. Water releases from the Hartwell Dam during drought levels 1 through 3 would be reduced as appropriate to maintain balanced pools throughout the basin.

The current drought trigger levels and maximum release rates in the Corps' Drought Contingency Plan are:

- Level 1 Trigger – Thurmond elevation reaches 326 ft-msl – Outflows reduced to 4,200 cfs max
- Level 2 Trigger – Thurmond elevation reaches 324 ft-msl – Outflows reduced to 4,000 cfs max
- Level 3 Trigger – Thurmond elevation reaches 316 ft-msl – Outflows reduced to 3,800 cfs max

Under the proposed drought plan EA, if river inflows at the Broad River gage reach a 28-day average of less than or equal to 10 percent of the average historical flow rate, outflows at Thurmond will be further reduced to the following:

- Level1 – Outflows reduced from 4,200 cfs to 4,000 cfs
- Level 2 – Outflows reduced from 4,000 cfs to 3,800 cfs
- Level 3 – Outflows reduced from 3,800 cfs to 3,600 cfs

-MORE-

Additional conservation measures will also be implemented in the proposed plan as follows.

- Level 2 – Thurmond Outflow will target 3600 cfs, November through January
- Level 3 - Thurmond Outflow will target 3100 cfs, November through January

Additionally, the Draft EA proposes that the Level 3 release of 3,100 cfs could be extended into February with approval from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries.

The Corps is soliciting public and agency comments on the draft EA for 30 days following release of the draft. The 2012 Draft EA documents are available on the Savannah District website at: http://www.sas.usace.army.mil/reports.html .

The deadline to submit comments is May 12, 2012.

Comments should be submitted via e-mail to: CESAS-PD@usace.army.mil or by mail to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District, Attn: PD, 100 W Oglethorpe Ave, Savannah GA 31401.

The Corps will address comments received in the development of a final EA. If a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is reached, the new drought plan operations could go into effect in June 2012.

Background and additional information

The first update to the Corps' 1989 Drought Contingency Plan occurred in 2006 with an Environmental Assessment that examined alternatives based on the drought of record from 1998 to 2000. Those update reduced outflows earlier in drought at levels 1 and 2, keeping more water in the reservoirs while still meeting downstream requirements.

Additionally, last year the Corps' completed an EA clarifying water management operation in drought Level 4. Historically, the Savannah River Basin has never reached Level 4 conditions since the construction of the first major hydropower dam on the Savannah River in 1954. The Level 4 EA concluded that the daily average releases from the Thurmond Dam will be adjusted from 3,600 cfs to 3,100 cfs from November through January, in the event that Level 4 is ever reached. The new Level 4 operations will extend the period over which the pools would be depleted; extend the period over which minimal environmental flows are available downstream; and reduce recovery time for all three reservoirs.

The Corps manages the reservoirs to meet multiple Congressionally-authorized purposes: hydropower, flood risk management, downstream navigation, water quality and water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife management. To learn more about the multiple users of the Savannah River, watch the Corps' 8-minute video clip "Balancing the Basin" online at: http://bit.ly/HEe38c

For more information on current lake levels and projections, contact the Savannah District Corporate Communications Office at 912-652-5014, or visit the District's lake-level website at http://water.sas.usace.army.mil.

To receive a free quarterly e-newsletter "Balancing the Basin" about Corps' water management of the reservoirs, send an e-mail to CESAS-CCO@usace.army.mil .

– 30 –