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## Corps needs to update Lanier operating plan

By Grier Todd

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However thankful we are for the recent rain, we cannot lose sight of the fact that our region and state are very much still in the midst of a water supply crisis. Nor should we lose sight of what it means specifically for Georgia's largest reservoir, Lake Lanier.

As reported by AJC earlier this week, the drought technically may be over, but "Lanier is still recovering and stands more than 9 feet below full." The AJC also reported earlier in March that Lake Lanier had more than 1 million fewer visitors in 2008 compared with 2005, the last year it was full.

It goes without saying what a damaging impact this has had on the region's economy, on top of what is facing our nation as a whole.

What many forget, however, is that Lake Lanier is not just a recreational amenity around which millions of people have built their livelihoods; it is the primary source of our region's water supply.

And though the recent rainfall is helpful, the reservoir was not built or intended to be maintained by weather conditions alone. The water levels are managed through releases at Buford Dam controlled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under the guidelines of the 1989 Water Control Plan.

It is clearly past time that the operating plan be updated to address the increased need for deliberate storage management, both in the North Georgia region as well as throughout the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin.

Storage management of our reservoirs has been effectively abandoned, and the absence of a reasonable and equitable operating plan is the greatest detriment to our water supply.

Last fall, the 1071 Coalition formed as a grassroots effort to reform the management practices of Lake Lanier. Named for the feet above sea level that is full pool for the lake, the coalition is comprised of community leaders, business owners, chambers of commerce, residents and others in the Lake Lanier area concerned with the preservation of the lake's water levels and their impact on our regional economy.

The coalition's primary issue is the departure from the basic operational philosophy that ensured Lake Lanier was

full by June 1 of each year. It included the deliberate storage of water throughout the spring season, taking advantage of not only winter rains, but early spring rains as well.

This deliberate storage is critical to the health of the lake. Lake Lanier sits on such a small watershed that it benefits from rainfall less than other reservoirs downstream, and even less during droughts, which are bound to return.

Thankfully, the state Environmental Protection Division monitors our water supply and looks for ways to improve current reservoir operations. Last year, the EPD requested reduced releases from Buford Dam through April 30 of this year.

We applaud the Corps for granting the request which, coupled with recent rainfall, has added several feet to the lake level. As EPD has stated, the reduced releases do not impair water quality or threaten water intakes below the dam.

But we still have several feet of dried-up shoreline to cover before we reach the lake's full pool and rejuvenate the ailing area's economy. EPD should request an extension to the reduced flows, and the Corps should comply with this request.

Members of the 1071 Coalition agree with those who advocate stricter conservation and accountability measures for the region's water supply, but we also implore that our federal partners take an updated approach to reservoir management.

While we are extremely grateful for EPD's request of reduced releases, the reduction is only a Band-Aid and cannot heal the stark absence of storage management.

Many diverse stakeholders within the ACF basin are in agreement that there is sufficient water to meet reasonable needs without causing harm to the environment or to its various users.

It is up to the Corps to find solutions that are satisfactory to all the users.

> Grier Todd is COO of Lake Lanier Islands Resort and president of the 1071 Coalition.

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