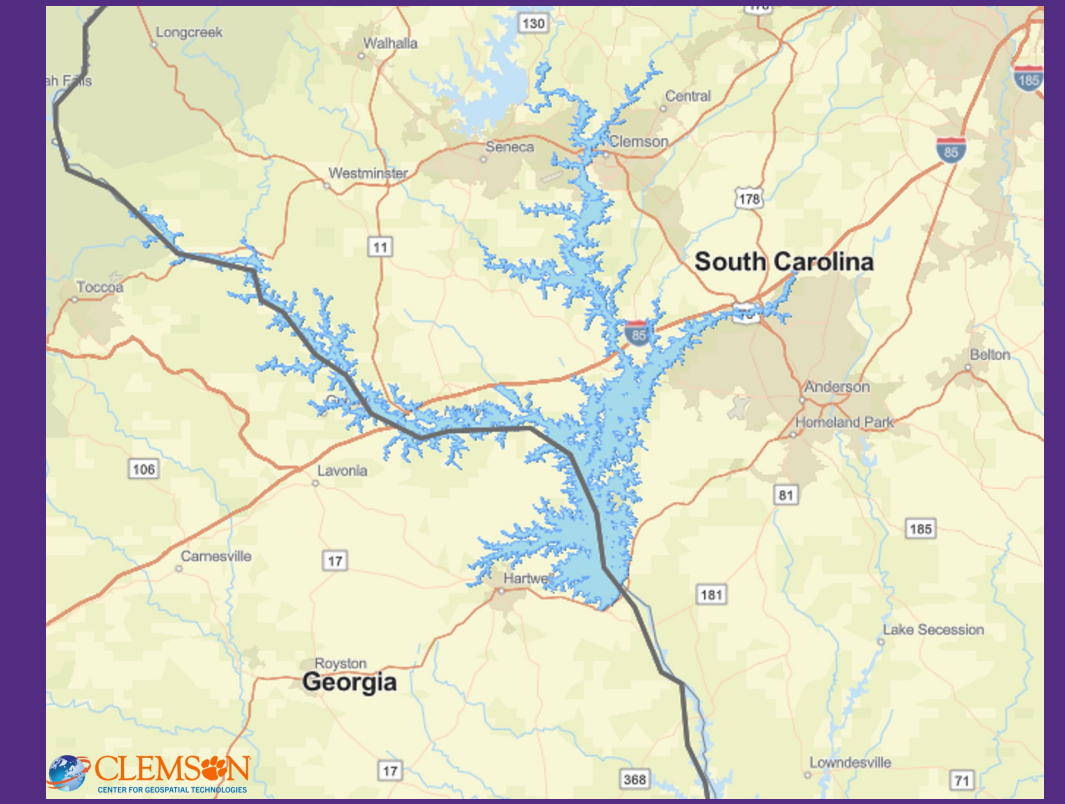


COMMUNITY-DRIVEN STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR A SOURCE WATER, TWO-STATE RESERVOIR

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With thanks to the many dedicated partners working towards the establishment of this organization, for the protection of Lake Hartwell.



INTRODUCTION

Clemson University sits on the shores of Lake Hartwell, a 56,000-acre reservoir that provides drinking water, power, and treasured recreational experiences for locals and visitors. It is the second-most-visited Army Corps of Engineers reservoir in the nation. The Bassmaster Classic professional fishing tournaments will be held at Lake Hartwell for the fifth time in 2027, making Lake Hartwell the most frequent host site in tournament history. It is the third reservoir in a series of hydropower reservoirs and spans the border between South Carolina and Georgia.

A newly-formed nonprofit organization, the Lake Hartwell Partners for Clean Water (LHPCW) established in 2022 with a vision of protecting Lake Hartwell for today and tomorrow. The environment to carry out such a vision is complex: multi-agency, two-state, and with an immense diversity of vested interests in an aging reservoir.

This project evaluates the benefits of strategic learning as an initial step in strategic planning and outlines a performance-oriented strategic plan to be adopted by the organization in the summer of 2026. The identification of topics for continued learning may be appropriate for other source water protection plans in development.



“The beginning is the most important part of the work.”
– Plato, *the Republic*

Fig. 1. (Left) The dam at Lake Hartwell. Fig 2. (Right) Lake Hartwell’s still waters. Credit: Ray’s Natural Media by Ray Felton

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A first step in conducting a strategic planning process is deciding if a strategic plan is needed. There are many reasons not to write a strategic plan: insufficient engaged input, budget constraints, lack of capacity to implement, unclear mandates, and more. A poorly developed strategic plan can leave lasting marks on an organization.

The LHPCW voted to create a five-year strategic plan for the organization, spanning 2026-2031, after a period of strategic learning, effectively delaying its development by nine months.

The creation of the strategic learning process will be evaluated against the near-final strategic plan, qualifying the extrinsic and intrinsic value of this process for both plan and organization. Further, the topics selected for the strategic learning process may be insightful for other source water or recreational waterbody strategic planning efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The organization of study meets monthly for one hour at a drinking water utility headquarters. In the spring of 2025, a unanimous vote established a monthly speaker series leading up to the development of the strategic plan. Over the course of three months and through facilitated discussion, the group conducted the following exercises:

- 1) Identification of significant concerns and threats to the health of Lake Hartwell and weighting these by vote using a limited number of dot stickers per member.
- 2) A sorting exercise delineating the highest-ranked concerns and threats by topics that LHPCW already collectively acknowledge must be elements of the strategic plan, and b) those topics that LHPCW should learn more about before committing the organization and its limited resources.
- 3) Identification of appropriate agencies and experts that could inform the membership of these topics via a monthly speaker series.

For six months, the organization held and advertised these “Speaker Series” events, temporarily replacing the regular meeting agenda. A Mentimeter® poll was conducted after six months to gauge the value of this strategic learning process.

IDENTIFIED CONCERNS AND THREATS

Table 1 shows the results of steps 1 and 2 of this facilitated process.

CONCERNS AND THREATS FOR AUTOMATIC INCLUSION IN PLAN	CONCERNS AND THREATS FOR FURTHER SHARED LEARNING
Education and Outreach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeowner Association education targeting lakeside communities • Real estate agents • Residential property management and erosion control 	Water Quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) • Nutrients • Sediment • Bacteria
On-lake Issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floating dock debris and other large items • Littering 	Education and Outreach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoreline erosion management • Army Corps of Engineers shoreline property management, policies, and extent of jurisdiction • Working with Elected and Appointed Officials
Litter Prevention across the Watershed	Advocacy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure and its impacts to water quality - wastewater, stormwater, homeowner education, road infrastructure • Invasive species
Riparian Buffer Policy Advocacy and Demonstration	Nuisance and Invasive Species: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize aquatic and vegetative • Identification of geography and threat • Boats and boat cleaning role in spread

STRATEGIC ISSUES

The membership identified strategic issues and goals for the health of the lake and the organization, with proposed projects underneath each goal.

Strategic Goal 1. Conduct projects that create measurable improvements to nutrient and sediment pollution, reducing the factors that create harmful algal blooms and impair drinking water quality. Select projects that demonstrate our capabilities as a small, growing, and reliable organization.

Strategic Goal 2. Engage community members in adopting practices that protect the lake and our watershed. Through education and awareness-building, create new social norms around nutrient reduction, erosion control, bacterial pollution mitigation, and ecosystem-beneficial practices.

Strategic Goal 3. Build organizational capacity for long-term resilience, community embeddedness, strategic growth, and accessing external revenue.

FINDINGS & NEXT STEPS

After six months of speaker series replacing regular meetings,

- The polled membership share a unanimous belief in the learning sessions' value (n=16), demonstrating strong alignment and buy-in for the strategic plan's next steps of implementation.
- Presentations on shoreline management policies and HABs scored highest, highlighting key interest areas for our stakeholders and areas of need that our organization can fulfill.
- Unanimous approval (n=16) that the speaker series continue quarterly for the intrinsic benefits it provided.
- Conclusion that a major service area for this organization is to continue to connect agencies and information for stakeholders across such a large, complicated watershed.
- The most important topic to conclude our strategic learning process is invasive species identification, management, and threat level.

These additional and documented benefits of this pause for strategic learning are expressed in Fig. 2.



Fig. 3. Word cloud responses to ancillary benefits of strategic learning process.

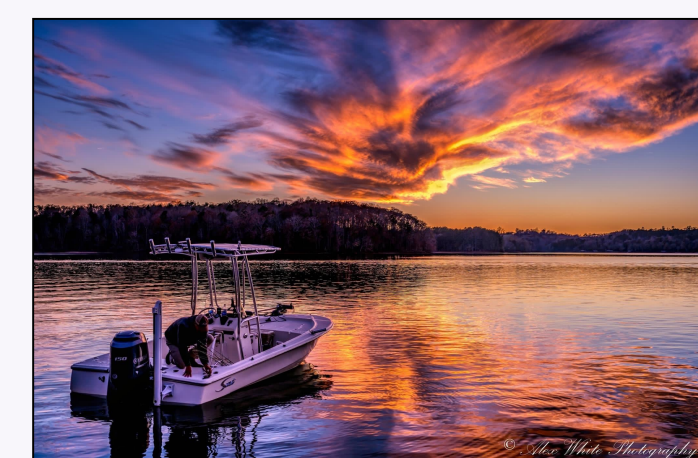


Fig. 4. Sunset photo of Lake Hartwell. Credit: Alex White Photography.

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