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While Raleigh's drinking water source, Falls Lake, is going dry, its old source south of the city, Lake Benson, is overflowing.

So Raleigh is asking state and federal regulators to let it pump water from Lake Benson into the Neuse River so the city can hold more back upstream in Falls Lake.

Approval of the stopgap seems likely, just in time to help Raleigh get through what is expected to be a dry winter and spring.

Raleigh, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and state regulators are working out a legal agreement that would let Raleigh pump and pipe 17 million gallons a day from Lake Benson south of Garner into the Neuse River near Auburn-Knightdale Road. That's just upstream from Raleigh's sewage plant.

The Corps would reduce the water it releases from Falls Lake's dam, north of Raleigh, by the same amount, saving much of it to drink.

At a cost of about \$300,000, the project would buy Raleigh another three weeks of water supply in Falls Lake.

"This will save up to a billion gallons of water for us," Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker said Tuesday. "The expense to the city, although substantial, is fairly small given the severity of our problem."

Raleigh would pump Lake Benson's water for two to four months, drawing down it and upstream Lake Wheeler by up to 10 feet. Both lakes are used for recreation.

The City Council is scheduled to receive a report today on the proposal. If state and federal regulators approve the city's Neuse River "augmentation plan," it could be under way in a week, said Dale Crisp, the city's utilities director.

Officials with the Corps of Engineers and state water regulators indicated support for the proposal Tuesday in a weekly drought-management conference call.

Crisp's plan involves some ingenuity because the water would pass through 10 miles of new sewer pipes laid for an unrelated project that hasn't been activated.

The water would be piped to the Neuse instead of released into Swift Creek below Lake Benson because it would be needed to boost the flow of the Neuse at Clayton, in western Johnston County. Swift Creek flows into the Neuse below Clayton.

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"We've been discussing the idea informally for a couple of years," Crisp said. "Things have aligned here for us to do it."

Upper Neuse Riverkeeper Dean Naujoks, however, said he has filed several objections to the plan with the Corps of Engineers.

"If the Corps is going to let Raleigh do that, Raleigh should be required to move to stronger water conservation measures," Naujoks said. "It's not fair for the Corps to let them off the hook."

Raleigh's current mandatory water restrictions, most notably a ban on watering lawns, are expected to continue until Falls Lake refills this winter -- or later.

The Triangle would need 5 to 7 more inches of rain than normal this winter to escape the drought, said Jeff Orrock, a National Weather Service forecaster in Raleigh. Instead, this winter is forecast to be drier than normal.

Meeker cautioned that the temporary project at Lake Benson should not mislead anyone into wasting water.

"This does not change the importance of conservation," he said. "But it does help us refill Falls Lake more quickly."