



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## OPINION

March 23, 2016

### **Lake Okeechobee Management Based on Science, Engineering Expertise**

As a member of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board, I have an obligation to rely on and communicate facts – not agenda-driven opinions -- to the public regarding the science and engineering-based operation of one of the most complex water management systems in the world.

To that end, neither the Board nor its staff coordinated public dissemination of facts related to Lake Okeechobee operations that are critical to public health, safety and welfare with any private entity, for profit or not-for-profit, as a recent opinion piece in the *Sun-Sentinel* falsely stated.

With respect to the article's observation about flood control, back pumping water into the lake is used only to protect lives and property. Thousands of families and businesses surrounding the lake, including farmers, are afforded the same level of flood protection as the rest of the 8.1 million people in our 16-county area of responsibility.

While it is true that water back pumped into the lake during the 96-hour operation contained nutrients that impact our ecosystems, water management in South Florida is a constant balance of competing demands on operations and resources. It's our job to make the difficult decisions to balance interests that are often not consistent with each other.

Back pumping is very rare and limited by a Florida Department of Environmental Protection permit, not by federal litigation, as the article suggested. In fact, it is rare because of Board policy and the sound environmental stewardship of the state permit that strictly limits this type of flood control measure for public safety.

And the article's claim that the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike is not related to Everglades restoration is just silly. The lake is the liquid heart of the Everglades. The dike's safety is critical to the operations of the lake and has a direct impact on the hydrology of the *River of Grass*.

While funding for dike repairs and Everglades restoration are technically separate, authorizing and appropriating the money necessary for both efforts are critical to meeting our goals. The imbalance between the state and federal investment matters and is not just a "green eyeshade" issue, because the federal government is hundreds of

millions of dollars behind in its commitment. This Board will continue to advocate for District taxpayers who have foot the bill to date and demand the federal government keep its promise to share half the cost of restoration.

Lastly, it is exceptionally surprising that no Board member was contacted by the opinion writer to get the facts of the matter. As stated first, my colleagues and I have and will continue to get out the facts to the public we serve.

*Melanie Peterson*  
*Governing Board Member*  
*South Florida Water Management District*