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# Reservoir to the rescue in Hendry County

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min-filled Caloosahatchee River is pumped Monday into the C-43 West Basin Reservoir in Hendry County . The South Florida Water Management District is pumping the water to ease the impact of fresh water and stabilize salinity levels in the estuary.

Written by  
**Chad Gillis**

A state agency scrambling to deal with the effects of rising water levels turned to a Hendry County Everglades restoration project Monday as a way to sop up the recent rainfall and Lake Okeechobee discharges.

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Engineers with the South Florida Water Management District started pumping water from the Caloosahatchee River (the Townsend Canal specifically) and sending it to the \$580 million C-43 West Basin Reservoir off State Road 80. The agency plans to build two storage cells on the 11,000 acres as a way to help balance fresh and saltwater levels in the Caloosahatchee estuary.

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Water management district engineer Tom McKernan said the site, if approved for funding by Congress, will eventually be capable of storing 170,000 acre-feet of water, or about 55 billion gallons.

“We’re going to put as much water on this land as we can,”

McKernan said while driving to the testing site. “We’ve had four straight months of above-average rainfall, which has resulted in most of South Florida being saturated. And obviously Lake Okeechobee levels are rising quickly.”



James Robertson, a lead pump operator for the South Florida Water Management District / photos by ANDREW WEST/THE NEWS-PRESS

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Water levels across South Florida have risen several feet since early June, the beginning of the rainy season. Stormwater run-off from the Caloosahatchee River watershed, which extends from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico, combined with Lake Okeechobee releases have functionally killed the brackish nursery grounds into ocean waters.

Although Lake Okeechobee levels (15.74 feet on Monday) are managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Water Management District must deal with some of effects of the discharges. The Army Corps uses the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers as giant ditches to keep Okeechobee waters under control and off residential and farming lands to the south.

Last week the Army Corps announced that all drainage systems are open, and “not just the usual ones.” Flows were measured at 12,540 cubic feet per second, nearly three times the volume needed to damage sea grasses in the estuary. The average flow at W.P Franklin Lock and Dam was more than 8,000 cubic feet per second for a 30-day period. The water ceiling to prevent environmental damage on the coast is 4,500 cubic feet per second.



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Written by Chad Gillis

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Heavy freshwater flows bring large volumes of tannin-stained waters to coastal estuaries. The water in San Carlos Bay, near the mouth of the Caloosahatchee, was so dark last week that light was penetrating less than two feet, which is not enough to sustain several species of sea grasses. Scientists with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation reported some of the worst estuary conditions on record.

Water management governing board member Mitch Hutchcraft said he's optimistic about the future of the Caloosahatchee River but that fixing the ecological problems will likely take many years and millions of dollars.

"We've had four months of above-average rainfall, and that's the first time that's happened since 1997," Hutchcraft said. "We need to reduce peak flows when we have lots of rain, like the conditions we're experiencing now. And then hold that water so when we have low flows we can release some fresh water to keep the salinity (levels) from coming way up the river."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is calling for 13 to 20 named storms, between seven and 11 hurricanes and three to six major hurricanes — Category 3 and higher. An average season equates to 12 named storms and six hurricanes, with three of those major storms.

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