



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

OPINION

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Dispersed Water Management Essential Part of Storage Solution for Estuaries

Dispersed water management has been an effective tool used by the South Florida Water Management District for a full decade, but some misconceptions about the program need to be cleared up.

First, while there's broad consensus that more water storage is needed, it must include storage north of Lake Okeechobee and in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie basins to prevent damaging freshwater releases to coastal estuaries. The District's Governing Board has prioritized completing large-scale projects such as the C-43 and C-44 reservoirs, both of which will improve the timing and volume of discharges to the coasts. However, nearly everyone acknowledges that these massive reservoirs alone are not the complete answer.

This is where shallow water storage on agricultural lands can complement public works. Through the Dispersed Water Management program, the District has worked with private property owners since 2005 to make additional storage available on thousands of acres. The program encompasses diverse projects, including water farming on fallow citrus lands, payment for environmental services on ranchlands and public-private partnerships such as the 16,000-acre Nicodemus Slough project in Glades County.

The common thread that ties these projects together is they can be put into action more quickly than constructing large reservoirs. Dispersed storage relies on relatively simple structures instead of multimillion-dollar levees and pump stations that can take years to design and build. In the easiest cases, removing a few boards from a culvert is enough to move water onto private lands ready to accept it.

A second misconception is that dispersed water management projects only hold water already on the land. Many sites receive and store regional runoff that would otherwise flow into Lake Okeechobee or be discharged to the estuaries. Dispersed storage also can help reduce nutrient loads, improve groundwater recharge and provide enhanced wildlife habitat.

Another misconception is that the Board is approving dispersed water management projects without knowing where they would be best located. This is inaccurate. District staff have rigorously analyzed the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie watersheds to

determine where additional storage would be most beneficial. Each proposed site is considered in that full context.

Perhaps the biggest misconception of all is the cost. Suggestions have been made that relying solely on public lands for shallow storage would be a more cost-effective approach. Unfortunately that's not feasible, because sufficient public lands *in the right locations* are not available to provide the needed capacity. In fact, a comprehensive evaluation showed that short-term storage opportunities on many public lands have already been maximized. Other sites identified in the evaluation are expected to be online in 2016.

Each property in the Dispersed Water Management program has features and storage capacities that determine the price for environmental benefits received. For the most recent group of projects being considered, the Board made a small investment to study project feasibilities, but going forward, long-term funding will make sense only if a significant environmental benefit can be achieved.

Taken as a whole, the Dispersed Water Management program even offers economic benefits by incentivizing landowners to enhance environmental stewardship while keeping private lands on local tax rolls. Water farming in particular is an excellent example of how dispersed storage can bridge both economic and environmental gaps. For citrus growers, it creates a use for lands taken out of production by greening disease; for coastal communities, it provides some of the local water storage capacity that their estuaries need now.

The Governing Board needs a diverse toolbox to meet the shared goals of protecting the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries and the Indian River Lagoon. That includes embracing an innovative, practical water storage program with willing landowners who want to be part of the solution.

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