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Activists: Storms heighten danger to Lake Okeechobee, urgency of U.S. Sugar purchase

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The approach of three tropical cyclones from the east, coupled with the surge in Lake Okeechobee's water level following Tropical Storm Fay, poses a serious threat to the integrity the massive earthen levee that protects 40,000 Glades residents and the rest of South Florida from flooding, environmentalists warned today.

Since Fay's arrival, the lake rose a record-breaking 40 inches in 17 days. That prompted the Army Corps of Engineers today to begin releasing lake water down canals to the east and west into the Caloosahatchee River and St. Lucie Canal - the first such significant release since April 2006.

The 11-day freshwater release, like others in the past, is expected to ravage those estuaries and deal a major setback to local economies whose fishing, tourism and real estate industries depend on healthy waterways.

In a conference call with reporters this morning, business and environmental leaders pointed to the lake's plight in urging the

state to complete its proposed \$1.75 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar. The 187,000 acres could help restore the historic southward flow of fresh water across from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, its natural direction for thousands of years.

"This has been a perennial problem with Lake Okeechobee," said Gray. "U.S. Sugar is the key component of the overall plan to fix this broken water system."

Gov. Charlie Crist announced the state's intention to buy U.S. Sugar in June, setting a Nov. 30 closing deadline.

But the plan comes with a hefty price tag and economic impact. A University of Florida study predicted a \$1.64 billion drop in economic output per year and loss of 10,711 jobs statewide.

These business and environmental leaders say it's worth it.

That water release that began today is only about a third as large as releases that followed busy hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005. Large fish kills, noxious algae blooms and the widespread death of sea grasses and oyster beds followed close behind, from which the estuaries are only now beginning to recover.

At the time, the Martin County Health Department posted signs at boat ramps and other access points along the St. Lucie estuary warning people to avoid contact with the water, said Leon Abood, former president of Realtors Association of Martin County and chairman of the Rivers Coalition. "We can't afford that sort of negative impact on everybody's livelihood."

The draining of Lake Okeechobee that began today is the first significant water release since April 2006. The total amount of fresh water dumped in the next 11 days would be enough to fill about 63,800 Olympic-size swimming pools at a time when South Florida remains under water restrictions.

Two days ago, the corps said the release would slow the lake's rise enough so that the water level should remain below 17.25 feet above sea level - the mark at which the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike is considered at risk. Today, the water level measured at 14.75 feet.

The water is being drained in a "pulse release," which scientists say will minimize - but not forestall - damage to the estuaries by mimicking the natural surges of fresh water the estuaries receive in a series of heavy rainstorms.

Rae Ann Wessel, a scientist with the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation, said the pulse release will worsen the harm from the natural runoff that has followed Tropical Storm Fay.

"We almost certainly cannot achieve meaningful estuary protection and Everglades restoration without this land to the south," Wessel said, referring to the pending deal with U.S. Sugar. "This is s a tremendous opportunity that is clearly being underscored with this event."

Local communities meet with OTTED County has great location, but no infrastructure

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Glades County Democrat MOORE HAVEN -- " Things are changing," said Don Upton, workshop mediator.

Mr. Upton and Mary Helen Blakeslee, Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED), fielded questions, and took notes from the August 27 meeting in Moore Haven. State and local government officials or their representatives were present during the community meeting with OTTED. The issues focused on how Glades County can thrive after United States Sugar Corporation (USSC) sells its holdings to South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). Other attendees were business owners, farmers, educators, retirees and residents. They voiced a commonly shared view that the population of Glades County does not have a seat at the table when state decisions are made that affect their existence.

Glades and 15 other south central counties will have to foot the bill for a \$1.75 billion deal between USSC and SFWMD, that will be finalized in November. These counties are served by SFWMD, and their property taxes may be used to leverage bonds to raise the money.

The hope of an industrial distribution center, or inland port, built in the south Lake Okeechobee area, would replace jobs and businesses lost with the shut down of sugar operations. It could be a central core of warehouses and supporting businesses. The railroad lines and trucks can carry freight from the inland port complex to both coasts and northward up into the state.

No one yet knows if this will be put on hold until water management puts an Everglades flow-way revival plan on the books, or if Glades County would even be considered for the port project. Many are concerned that Florida Crystals, western Palm Beach County, has a jump start on the project because the company has already begun the lobby process to influence officials. One factor in Glades County's favor is that the industrial complex, if built in western Palm Beach County, intrudes on the proposed restored flow-way desired by environmentalists and Governor Crist. According to a presentation by county commissioner Paul Beck, choosing a site in Glades County would enable it to be the hub of an enormous project that would employ well up to 25,000 regionally.

The promise of a new economy for Glades County residents has generated many well thought-out and sound plans; however, the small county's geographic boundaries, remoteness with limited transportation, and evaporating revenues were the most evident concerns of the audience. It was also noted that many local grant opportunities end in disappointment because matching funds cannot be raised.

Citizens and their elected officials have been given no clues about the closed-door negotiations on the sugar deal. What will happen to all the holdings of the largest sugar cane producer in

the United States? How many years will it take to pay off the mortgage? Where will the workforce find new jobs? In other words-who will pay the piper?

People at the OTTED meeting were reminded of past ideas for enticing new industry. These tar-geted industries included health care/science, building/construc-tion components, niche manu-facturing, logistics/distribution and bio-fuels/energy. However, no one knows how these indus-tries will ever be lured into this county without the foundation of infrastruc-ture; and with the regu-lations required by the Depart-ment of Community Affairs.

Geographic boundaries such as clogged waterways have hin-dered the county's ability to use them as a means of commerce and tourism, and ancient two-lane county roads were never in-tended for heavy truck caravans. The remoteness and isolation of Glades County has been difficult for residents, considering many opportunities and conveniences have disappeared in past years. Ardis Hammock, farmer, men-tioned the perils of traveling a two-lane S.R. 80 and C.R. 74 in the middle of the night. The com-mute to a job in another region, or a four hour round trip for medi-cal and dental services has been a hardship on many residents.

This would also be a hardship that could cause potential new resi-dents and businesses to choose another area for re-location.

Tommy Perry, chairman Glades County Economic Devel-opment, told OTTED representa-tives that canal dredging and rail-road preservation were important for eco-tourism and freight tran-sit; and that a natural gas line and waste/potable water extensions were crucial for development.

Glades County is faced with the daunting task of helping bankroll a billion dollar deal that is going on behind closed doors. Gover-nor Crist and state officials have been invited to visit the county and take a good look.

"All of them need to know fi rst hand how this will affect Glades County," said commission chair-man Paul Beck.

Corps of Engineers to start releasing Lake Okeechobee water

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the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will start pulse releases averaging 4,000 cubic feet per second for the next 11 days. Lake Okeechobee's water level reached 14.68 feet Wednesday. Water managers for the Corps said the releases will not lower the lake, but could slow its rise. It'd be nice to be breaking even by the end of the pulse release, said John Zediak, chief of the Corps of Engineers Jacksonville district water management section.

If any of the storms lined up across the Atlantic hits the basin, however, the pulse releases could end in favor of larger ones. What the storm brings is really the indicator of what we'll try to do, Zediak said. The releases are only about a third of what came down the Caloosahatchee River from the lake in 2005 and 2006, when nutrient-laden water from the lake meant dead seagrasses and severe red tides for coastal areas. Having lake releases isn't going to help the water quality of the river or the estuary, said Rae Ann Wessel, natural resources policy director for the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. The lake is lower, and these are relatively smaller releases than some. Hopefully that'll lessen the impact. However, it's still going to have an impact. Both the lake and the river are suffering from too much water from Tropical Storm Fay. In fact, the lake rose by nearly three feet in a week, its fastest rise ever. The Caloosahatchee was flowing at a rate of more than 12,000 cubic feet per second a few days ago, but had fallen to just over 5,000 on Wednesday. The estuaries have been receiving water since Fay came ashore, Zediak said. Too much water. The river should flow between 2,500 and 4,500 cubic feet per second. Wessel said thinking of that range is dangerous, because dirty water can damage the river at 2,500. Turbid water blocks light from reaching the depths and chokes off oxygen, she said. In the 25-foot deep channel, the bottom levels become oxygen depleted, she said. Zediak said he didn't yet know what the peak flows might be in the next 11 days, but the average will be 4,000 cubic feet per second. That's enough to fill 4,000 Olympic swimming pools every day. The Caloosahatchee won't be the only water body affected. The St. Lucie Canal east of the lake will be receiving discharges of 1,800 cubic feet per second. We're also looking at the future, said Zediak. What the storms may bring us and where we are in hurricane season. If things change drastically, if Hanna veered and came up the center of the state, it may cause us to suspend the pulse releases. That likely would be in favor of bigger releases. The district released as much as 9,800 cubic feet per second in 2006.

These releases are the first for purposes of flood control since April 2006. There have been smaller environmental releases.

Wessel said the releases only underscore the dire need for more water storage. We really need to look at the South Florida Water Management District and the Corps to expedite those opportunities, like the U.S. Sugar deal, she said. That's going to be critical. The deal is also years away, or perhaps even decades. In the meantime, water was being pumped back into the lake from at least one Everglades Agricultural Area this week.

The releases are expected to begin at 7 a.m. They would continue through next Sunday.

