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Groups tout U.S. Sugar deal as solution to Lake Okeechobee woes

09/05/2008
Greenwire
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EVERGLADES: Groups tout U.S. Sugar deal as solution to Lake Okeechobee woes (09/04/2008)
Advertisement

Daniel Cusick, Greenwire reporter

For the first time in more than two years, the Army Corps of Engineers this morning allowed polluted stormwater from Florida's Lake Okeechobee to pour into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, where dangerously high spikes in nitrogen and phosphorus are likely.

The planned 11 days of water "pulses" are intended to ease pressure on the south Florida lake's fragile earthen dike, which is undergoing repairs and reinforcements to protect communities and sugar fields immediately south of the lake.

In a public notice, the corps' Jacksonville District office said water releases would amount to 4,000 cubic feet per second down the Caloosahatchee, which drains to the Gulf of Mexico near Fort Myers, and roughly half that amount down the St. Lucie River, which drains to the Indian River Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean near Stuart.

While the corps maintains that its pulses of Lake Okeechobee water are designed "to mimic nature and provide discharges ... similar to what might be seen during a typical rainfall event," environmentalists have strongly criticized the practice, saying it poses major threats to the receiving estuaries.

They say one possible solution is for the state to finalize its planned purchase of nearly 200,000 acres of farmland south of the lake from U.S. Sugar Corp. The deal would allow the corps to store excess water in new treatment reservoirs rather than dumping it in the rivers.

As recently as 2005, the St. Lucie estuary experienced an explosion of toxic blue-green algae linked to polluted Lake Okeechobee discharge, resulting in fish kills and public health advisories discouraging direct contact with water in the Indian River Lagoon.

"We have fish with lesions almost every time we have major discharges," Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society and state co-chairman of the Everglades Foundation, said in a conference call with reporters this morning. "It gets the water out of the lake, but it has devastating effect" on the downstream estuaries, he said.

Other species habitats, including oyster beds and sea grasses that provide vital fish nurseries, also are harmed when the estuaries experience rapid changes in salinity due to shocks of freshwater from the lake, he added.

Before today's releases, no water had been discharged from Lake Okeechobee since 2006 because the region was experiencing a prolonged drought. As recently as this spring, wildfires were burning across the exposed lake bottom, where years of organic matter had accumulated and dried into tinder.

But last month's Tropical Storm Fay dumped more than 25 inches of rain across portions of Florida, including Lake Okeechobee's primary feeder watershed, the Kissimmee River, which drains much of central Florida south of Orlando.

Paul Gray, the Audubon Society's chief scientist on Lake Okeechobee, noted that the lake remains the only catch basin for stormwater draining from central Florida, and that it is consistently overtaxed by even moderate flood events.

Since Fay's slow pass across the state in mid-August, stormwater runoff has raised the lake's level by 40 inches, from 11.3 feet on Aug. 15 to nearly 15 feet today. Given the projected path of three westward-moving tropical systems -- Hanna, Ike and Josephine -- Gray said the lake "is literally one storm away from being in big trouble."

'This doesn't work for anybody'
Environmental groups say the lake's chronic water problems could be solved, however, with the completion of the state's proposed \$1.7 billion U.S. Sugar acquisition, announced by Gov. Charlie Crist (R) in June.

That deal would involve the conversion of more than 185,000 acres of sugarcane fields into storage basins that would allow water managers to treat and then release billions of gallons annually to the parched lower Everglades. Excess water also could be set aside for use by farmers and water utilities during drought periods like the one that just ended, Gray said.

"Two months ago, we were in severe water rationing mode; now

we're about to start dumping vital water again," Gray said. "This doesn't work for anybody."

Leon Abood, former president of the Realtor Association of Martin County and chairman of the Rivers Coalition, which organized in 1998 to oppose the corps' releases from Lake Okeechobee, said the U.S. Sugar land deal, more than simply aiding Everglades restoration, will help secure the tourism- and service-based economies on both coasts by protecting their most important resource, clean water.

"This event should galvanize the citizens of Florida to support Gov. Crist's proactive attempt to acquire these lands," Abood said. "It's good for Lake Okeechobee, it's good for the Everglades, and it's good for updating an 80-year-old water supply system."

Lake Okeechobee releases begin

09/05/2008

TC Palm

Ed Killer

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Lake Okeechobee releases begin: Dike protected at environmental cost to estuaries

By Ed Killer (Contact)

Thursday, September 4, 2008

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PORT MAYACA — The flood gates at Port Mayaca opened Thursday for the first time in over two years, discharging water from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie Canal and St. Lucie River.

South Florida residents concerned about the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike that encircles Florida's greatest lake breathed a sigh of relief. Residents of the southern Treasure Coast and near Fort Myers simply sighed.

Water managers with the Army Corps of Engineers plan to execute pulse releases for 11 days until Sept. 14 unless conditions change. Pulse releases are designed to more closely mimic natural runoff from rain events.

"We will consider conditions as they change," said John Zediak, chief of the water management section for the Corps. "If they change, there could be a greater discharge if needed."

Thursday the level of Lake Okeechobee stood at 14.75 feet. Water is still entering the lake from more than a dozen inflows causing the lake's level to rise slowly.

The Corps plans to release fresh water runoff from Tropical Storm Fay at a rate of 1,800 cubic feet per second into the St. Lucie estuary. Much of that amount — as much as 1,100 cubic feet per second — is still considered runoff from Martin County's watershed. As much as 4,000 cubic feet per second was being discharged through the west outlet into the Caloosahatchee River and the Charlotte Harbor estuary downstream.

The Corps said the discharges are needed in order to reduce the amount of rise in the lake. Even with as much as 5,800 cubic feet per second of targeted flow from the two outlets, inflows combined to pour more than 15,500 cubic feet per second into the lake.

The Corps is attempting to avoid a repeat of 2005 when Lake Okeechobee's water level rose to a near-record 18.25 feet. Thursday, Corps chief of engineering Steve Duba said "the dike is sound."

The Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule implemented by the Corps in April targets a lake management level of 12.5 to 15.5 feet year round. At 17.25 feet, the Corps considers the 71-year-old dike to be at great risk of failure.

"In 17 days we've seen the lake rise 40 inches from a very low level of 11.3 feet to 14.75 feet," said Paul Gray, science coordinator Audubon of Florida. "That's only 2.5 feet from what the Corps considers an unacceptable risk to the dike."

Gray referred to 2005 — the last time the Corps was forced to perform heavy releases to the east and west in order to prevent the dike from failing.

"Over the last 15 years or so, the lake has either been way too high or way too low," he said. "When the lake was too high, some 75 square miles of aquatic plant communities were lost and they have not grown back. Then, they had to make massive discharges in 2005 that dumped 10 years of water supply out of the lake. The problem is, it doesn't work for anybody."

Mark Perry, executive director of Florida Oceanographic and co-chair of the Everglades Coalition, said this release will likely be similar to some of the nine major releases authorized by the Corps between 1983 and 2005. Each major discharge period correlated with observations of lesioned fish in the estuary, a river-wide bloom of blue green algae and the death of critical aquatic habitat such as oysters and sea grass beds.

The whole mess points to the urgent need for water managers to complete the proposed deal with U.S. Sugar to acquire 187,000 acres of land, Perry said. Until that deal is done and a flow-way is constructed to return the natural flow of water southward from the lake into the Everglades, the present set of releases will help no one, he said.

"Is this going to help the lake? No." Perry said. "Will it hurt the estuaries? Yes."

Duba said that as long as the approaching storms Hanna and Ike do not drop the magnitude of precipitation that slow-moving Tropical Storm Fay did in the Kissimmee River basin, the pulse releases should enable the system to catch up.

"I sure would hate to see another three feet of rain on the lake, but Fay was an unusual event," Duba said. "In a worse case situation, another Fay would make us extremely concerned."

WATER RESTRICTIONS

According to South Florida Water Management District deputy executive director of water resources Chip Merriam, the release of water from Lake Okeechobee is unrelated to district wide water restrictions.

"Basically we've been trying to educate everyone that watering seven days a week is unnecessary anyway — particularly during our rainy season," Merriam said. "For homeowners, watering twice a week is appropriate and not wasteful."

Merriam said the district does not look at the need for restrictions on a month to month basis. The challenge the district faces is how to balance those needs during times when 24-30 inches of rain falls in one month then it doesn't rain for 30 days.

"All of the water management districts in Florida are working together to develop plans to manage landscape irrigation needs on the dry side of the system," he said.

Lake 'O' releases begin

09/05/2008

WPTV-TV

Bryan Garner

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Lake 'O' releases begin
Reported by: Bryan Garner
Email: bgarner@wptv.com
Last Update: 9/04 7:40 pm

(Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers) STUART, FL -- Fisherman Ed Skupeen has learned a pretty good trick.

When the Army Corps of Engineers opens up the St. Lucie Locks, bait fish tend to slip through along with the excess lake water. And if he casts his line just right, he may just catch a fat snook waiting for a bite to eat.

"They will just stay on the bottom and wait for the bait to slosh by," says Skupeen.

Skupeen knows this small bit of good fortune comes at a sizable price to the environment, as the usually salty St. Lucie River is now forced to absorb massive amounts of fresh water from Lake Oeechobee..

The Army Corps of Engineers began releasing lake water through the locks at 7am Thursday. More than 13,000 gallons of lake water pass through the St. Lucie Locks each second - that's enough to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool every minute.

That may sound like a lot, but historically this is considered a low-level release: just enough to drain the lake and lower the flood risk should another tropical storm come our way.

"Until we're able to move large amounts of water south, this is going to be an ongoing problem," says Leon Abood, president of the Rivers Coalition.

In 2006 the Rivers Coalition sued the Army Corps to try and stop the releases, which can pollute the river and cause algae blooms.

Abood says two years without lake releases have helped the St. Lucie. Oyster beds have regrown, so have sea grasses and the fish populations that feed on them.

"In a short order all the work and the progress in the past years we've been able to gain, we'll lose it in a matter of weeks," says Abood.

Even those who love the river say there's no way around these releases - the product of what they describe as an outdated drainage system.

They say the safety of the 40,000 people who live around the lake and its fragile dike must come first.

"The people are going to live there. They're not going to move...so we sacrifice the fish for them," says Skupeen, as he casts out his line, hoping for another snook.

River activists, including Abood, hope these potentially damaging releases will rally more support around the state's recent purchase of U.S. Sugar, with the goal of moving more water south toward the everglades.

The Army Corps of Engineers has scheduled the lake releases to continue for the next 11 days.

Some callers to our newsroom have asked why water restrictions remain in South Florida if the lake has re-filled and clearly overcome the drought of the past year.

Linette Trabulsy, a spokesperson for the South Florida Water Management District, says her agency's restrictions on home irrigation are independent of the Army Corps' decision to release lake water.

She says SFWMD aims to promote year-round water conservation, keeping consistent water restrictions, rather than starting and ending them based on the seasons. She says current water restrictions limit home irrigation to twice a week.

