



Letters to the Editor

/ News / Letters to the Editor

[Print this Page](#)

[←--back to story](#)

## Court decision crucial for funding U.S. Sugar land purchase

Guest commentary by RAE ANN WESSEL, Natural Resource Policy Director, SCCF

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Much is at stake for those of us who live near the Caloosahatchee and indeed, throughout Southwest Florida - as a circuit court judge decides whether to validate a \$536 million bond issue for the U.S. Sugar land acquisition that will clear the way for an ambitious plan to restore historic Lake Okeechobee water flow to the south.

With the advantage of hindsight, it's apparent that man's efforts to "re-engineer" Florida's natural water management system nearly 130 years ago brought a host of unintended consequences, leading to the significant water management and water quality issues we face today.

Before 1880, the Caloosahatchee River and estuary were freestanding systems, unaffected by Lake Okeechobee except during periods of very heavy rainfall.

Fast-forward to the present day, and the results of human tinkering with Lake O are all too evident. Last summer Tropical Storm Fay inundated the lake's watershed with a record 40 inches in 17 days.

During the rainy 2004-2005 hurricane season, water containing 900 metric tons of phosphorus more than six times the established target for a healthy lake wound up in Lake O. Ensuing releases from the lake sometimes over 8,000 cubic feet per second wrought havoc in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, killing fish, oysters, clams and blue crabs while also stimulating a proliferation of unwanted and harmful algal blooms.

Visitors our region's bread and butter stayed away in droves as national news organizations reported on once pristine Southwest Florida beaches fouled by stacks of algae and fish corpses.

Without increased water storage capacity and a restoration of the flow-way south to the Everglades and Florida Bay, this drought and deluge cycle will continue, with devastating consequences for our local waterways, wildlife, habitat and economy.

The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation has long advocated in concert with partners in the Everglades Coalition and Everglades Foundation in support of this vital restoration. In recent years, SCCF has contributed another significant element to the stakeholder process: scientific data.

SCCF's River, Estuary and Coastal Observing Network (RECON) is a network of sensors deployed throughout the Caloosahatchee River and estuary providing real-time water quality measurements. Since 2007, RECON has allowed SCCF Marine Laboratory scientists to connect the dots between Lake Okeechobee releases and water quality events in our region.

The acquisition of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land is a critical first step to address the unintended consequences of an outdated water management strategy begun more than a century ago. The deal represents our best opportunity for beginning to recreate a water storage mechanism and water flow that mimics the functions provided by the historic River of Grass.

Failure to complete the U.S. Sugar land acquisition would jeopardize the health of the Caloosahatchee watershed and put our region's fresh water supply as well as our tourism-based economy at grave risk. For our region, the cost of failure to act on this unique opportunity is simply too great.

The bond hearing to finance the state's purchase of U.S. Sugar land was completed this week and an order from the circuit court judge is expected in the next two weeks. If the bonds are approved it is expected that the opponents who brought the suit, Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Indian tribe, will appeal to the Florida Supreme Court. The closing on the U.S. Sugar land, once planned for this September, is now scheduled for next March.

Further delays in the process will only push the cost of future phases of Everglades restoration higher an increase that will be borne by taxpayers. We urge the residents of Southwest Florida and our regional elected officials to support completion of the U.S. Sugar land acquisition without further delay.

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