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## Eve Samples: We can act now to prevent more polluted water releases from Lake Okeechobee

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05/03/2010

Stuart News

Samples, Eve

MARTIN COUNTY — We know how Gulf Coast residents feel, don't we?

We know the sense of dread that arises when polluted, coffee-brown water gushes our way.

We know the helplessness involved in waiting for the powers-that-be to make it stop.

We know because it's happening now in Martin County.

Instead of an oil slick, we're facing intensifying releases of polluted water from Lake Okeechobee, courtesy of the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps started the releases March 27 and increased them Monday morning to 1,800 cubic feet per second — or about 1.16 billion gallons a day.

The Corps says it's protecting the Herbert Hoover Dike that encircles Lake Okeechobee as lake levels rise. But in the process, it's killing marine life in the St. Lucie River Estuary.

Salinity levels have plummeted to two parts per thousand near the Roosevelt Bridge, down from the typical 20 to 25 parts, said Mark Perry, executive director of Florida Oceanographic Society.

"Adult oysters are dying," Perry told me Monday.

Spotted sea trout and sand sea trout are likely to be affected during their spawning season, he added.

And silt and sediment are settling in the estuary, damaging sea grass and other organisms.

"It's terrible, absolutely terrible," Perry said.

On Thursday, the Martin County Health Department warned residents to avoid contact with the water near the Roosevelt Bridge because testing revealed high levels of enteric bacteria. The department ended the advisory on Saturday, but it is testing again this week to see if it should be reinstated.

Perry believes there is a correlation between the releases from Lake Okeechobee and the warnings. Even with the advisory lifted, "people should exercise extreme caution," by limiting contact with the water, he warned.

This is not a new story. It has played out on our waterways for decades.

That doesn't mean we should throw our hands up. So what can we do?

We can mark our calendars for 10 a.m. May 12 and 9 a.m. May 13. That's when the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board is meeting at the Blake Library in Stuart.

This is Martin County's chance to show up in big numbers to demand that the board support the purchase of 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration, a move that eventually will move excess lake water to the south, as Mother Nature intended.

Perry believes residents should also ask the board to work with the Corps to send a portion of the water south immediately, through existing canals.

"They could take some more water south, but for whatever reason, the Corps of Engineers is not working with the water management district to see if that's a possibility," Perry said.

If you can't make it to next week's governing board meeting, you can add your name to a letter Perry wrote to Army Corps Col. Alfred Pantano Jr. It's available online at [www.floridaoceanographic.org](http://www.floridaoceanographic.org), under "Coastal Estuaries Alert."

As damaging as the latest discharges are, they pale in comparison to the big blast of lake water Martin County would face if this summer is especially rainy — something experts are forecasting.

That's why it's important to take action now.

The oil spill threatening the Gulf Coast is horrifying, and its potential to reach Florida's East Coast is real.

But the damage from Lake Okeechobee discharges have been happening for years. They, like the oil spill, merit a big response.

Eve Samples is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects her opinion. For more on Martin County topics, follow her blog at [TCPalm.com/samples](http://TCPalm.com/samples). Contact her at (772) 221-4217 or [eve.samples@scripps.com](mailto:eve.samples@scripps.com).

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## Start over on inland port: Project for the Glades can't go in St. Lucie County.

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05/01/2010

Palm Beach Post - Online

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By The Palm Beach Post

A project that aims to bring jobs to the Glades can't wind up in St. Lucie County, but that might happen.

The Florida Crystals site selected by the Port of Palm Beach for a rail hub/warehousing district - known as an inland port - is about to be withdrawn. The site, south of Lake Okeechobee, is the subject of a challenge by the Florida Department of Community Affairs because it could pollute land for Everglades restoration. To settle the challenge, Florida Crystals is offering an 850-acre site near Belle Glade and South Bay that is acceptable to environmentalists.

For those Glades cities, worried about lost jobs from the sale of U.S. Sugar land, no site could be better. But the site was not part of the port's politically driven selection process last year. If final negotiations with Florida Crystals - extended last week for an extra month - fail, the port can negotiate with backers of the second-place finisher, a 7,000-acre site in western St. Lucie County.

The port seeks a partnership with private investors to build a regional hub for itself, the Port of Miami and Broward County's Port Everglades to handle larger cargo shipments from the Panama Canal widening in 2014. The Treasure Coast site offers a team of Republican fund-raisers and ex-politicians. They argue that their site is closest to highways and rail lines, but it was the least likely among four finalists to produce jobs for Glades residents. An excellent site

proposed by Hilliard Bros. and U.S. Sugar in Hendry County was ranked third.

By picking a Treasure Coast site, port commissioners would deliver an economic plum to a location far from their voters. They are in this position because they wouldn't listen to warnings about the Florida Crystals site. The politics worked against the Crystals site because the company is trying to block the U.S. Sugar sale. Still, Florida Crystals hasn't abandoned its site, and its offer to settle could be a stall tactic. If negotiations drag on, Gov. Crist will be out of office. A new governor may allow industrial development south of Lake Okeechobee.

Commissioners could try to negotiate with the St. Lucie team. Or they could throw out all bids and start again. Florida Crystals could pitch its new site, the better of those two choices to assure that jobs from an inland port stay in the Glades.

