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OP-ED: Water managers working to restore balance for Caloosahatchee River

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05/30/2010
Naples Daily News
Charles Dauray

An unusually wet “dry” season has forced South Florida’s water managers into an all-too-familiar balancing act.

Since Nov. 1, the 16-county region of the South Florida Water Management District, including Lee County, has received an average of almost six inches of rain more than normal. As recently as May 10, Lake Okeechobee’s water level stood above 15 feet — on the upper end of the management range used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The high lake level, the arrival of the wet season and forecasts for an active hurricane season have created the balancing act for the Corps and the district between the competing needs of flood control, public safety, water supply and the ecosystem. Working with a fixed system with limited storage and a 730-square-mile lake surrounded by the aging Herbert Hoover Dike, the Corps has been releasing water from the lake into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers to protect public safety.

Southwest Florida residents are understandably frustrated with that decision. They do not need to be reminded of the harmful effects these freshwater releases have had on the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary in past years. The district hears these concerns and is taking every reasonable step possible to evaluate and implement strategies that will minimize the need for lake releases when our region has an overabundance of water.

Working with an assortment of other agencies, environmental organizations, ranchers and researchers, the district has added 126,350 acre-feet of surface water storage capacity on private, public and tribal lands around Lake Okeechobee since 2005. This additional storage has been made available through regional public projects and a district program that encourages property owners to hold water on their land rather than drain it and to store regional runoff.

More storage is potentially available through planned projects, provided issues related to water quality, endangered species protection and funding can be addressed. The district is also examining the feasibility of storing water north

and south of the lake on district lands and sites set aside for Everglades restoration projects.

While these alternative water-storage programs have shown potential, they cannot relieve the burden on the estuaries alone. For some perspective, 450,000 acre-feet of alternative storage in the watershed would potentially ease about a foot of water off the lake. Yet a single foot of rainfall in the watershed draining into the big lake can produce a 4-foot rise in water level virtually overnight.

The long-term solution for reducing freshwater discharges to the estuaries from Lake Okeechobee has to include the ongoing rehabilitation of the 75-year-old earthen dike that surrounds it. The Army Corps of Engineers recently awarded a \$40 million contract for repairs to the most vulnerable section of the Herbert Hoover Dike, a 22-mile segment between Port Mayaca and Belle Glade. Improving the integrity of the dike will enable the Corps to safely contain more water in the lake instead of sending it to the coasts.

Everglades restoration efforts also promise to substantially increase water storage to the benefit of the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. Over the last year, we have seen significant forward momentum on the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), which will eventually enable more clean water to go south to the Everglades — where it is needed. In addition, the district's planned acquisition of 73,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. will create unprecedented opportunities to store water that were never envisioned by CERP.

The Southwest Florida residents who live, work and play on the Caloosahatchee River depend on the health of the river and its estuary. The district will continue to work with the Corps, its partners and concerned stakeholders to ensure balanced decision-making and secure permanent solutions to protect and improve our treasured ecosystem.

At summit, Floridians urge action to preserve, restore Everglades

05/29/2010

Axcess News

Julia Cardenuto

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(AXcess News) Wahington - Hundreds of people, including many Floridians, discussed how to restore the Everglades at a two-day summit last week.

Stuart, Fla., resident Mark D. Perry, Florida Oceanographic Society executive director and Everglades Coalition state co-chairman, and Nathaniel Reed, former assistant secretary of the Department of Interior for Fish, Wildlife and National Parks, of Jupiter, Fla., stressed the importance of acting on the issue as soon as possible.

Their main concern is St. Lucie River, which is being polluted with water from Lake Okeechobee.

"Unless we are able to take Lake Okeechobee water south, clean it and take it into the Everglades system, we will be the escape valve forever," Reed said.

Lake Okeechobee waters used to go to the Everglades, but after canal and roadway construction, the polluted water now goes to the St. Lucie River through the St. Lucie Canal.

The pollutants are mainly from cattle and sugar industries around the lake. The state is trying to buy some of the land that belongs to U.S. Sugar.

"Billions of dollars and the economy are being affected," Perry said.

Reed said the land purchase is vital.

"It's a big deal ... but the good thing is that it can be done," Reed said.

The Everglades summit, the first of its kind, was organized by the Everglades Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Florida.

"The reason I'm here is to hopefully lobby with congressmen and senators to help us find a way to stop the discharge of dirty water that is ruining our estuaries," Thomas P. Bausch, Sewall's Point, Fla., commissioner, said in an interview.

He said the Everglades restoration will do more than clean the estuaries.

"The big thing is that we have an economic issue, the sport fishing industry is hurting, our tourism industry is hurting and these are big economic assets that Martin County has," Bausch said.

Doug Smith, Martin County commissioner, was one of several people who met with Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Fla., and others as part of the summit. He said it is important to remind government officials of the area's problems.

"Our mission here is to keep them fully aware of what's going on and try to make sure that they understand that what's happening to our estuaries is just as damaging as what's happening at the Gulf," he said.

Perry said the officials appreciated the meetings. "They are all receptive to the ideas," he said.

The National Park Service released a draft environmental impact statement May 19, which suggests extending the Tamiami Trail Bridge by 5.5 miles.

The bridge is part of the \$20 million Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, which the federal and Florida governments agreed in 2000 to fund.

Summit speakers urged residents to talk to their congressional representatives about the importance of the River of Grass to Florida's, and the nation's, ecosystem.

"The main message is that there is a lot of support in terms of enthusiasm for that project, but without the funds, it isn't going to happen," Bausch said.

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05/26/2010

Island Reporter

Charles Dauray

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Corps, residents agree at Stuart meeting: Lake O water needs to go south

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05/25/2010

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers

Treadway, Tyler

STUART — The Army Corps of Engineers and Treasure Coast residents upset with discharges of dirty water from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie River Estuary actually agreed on something at a public meeting Tuesday night: That the water needs to go south instead.

"Would I like the water to go south?" asked Col. Alfred Pantano, head of the Corps Jacksonville District that includes South Florida. "Amen."

Pantano said the Corps has to release water from Lake O to prevent possibly devastating and deadly flooding if the Herbert Hoover Dike fails but is prevented from sending water south by:

A court order that strictly limits pollution in water sent to the Everglades.

A lack of water treatment and conservation areas south of the lake.

Threats to the endangered Cape Sable sparrow and snail kite that higher water levels would cause.

"The solution is obvious," Pantano said. "We need a way to clean, store and convey water south out of the lake. But the reality is that none of that infrastructure exists today. It just flat out isn't there."

Karl Wickstrom of Stuart, head of the Rivers Coalition Legal Defense Fund, asked Pantano if the proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar Co. land south of Lake Okeechobee "would provide the facilities you need. Is anything as important as acquiring that land?"

Pantano replied that "having the land is not everything, but it would be huge. And having the right land is key."

In the meantime, Pantano said, the releases into the St. Lucie that began March 27 would "continue for the foreseeable future."

At the current rate of 1,170 cubic feet per second, or about 756 million gallons of water a day, it will take 50 days to lower the lake one foot, Pantano said; and the lake currently is two feet higher than it should be at this time of year.

"My alternatives, right now, are limited," Pantano said.

Waving a copy of a Corps handout from 2006 that stated 19 projects approved in the 2000 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan would be completed by 2010, John Mauer of Stuart told Pantano, "The reason you can't send water south is because the Corps hasn't done anything in 10 years. The state did its part (to raise matching funds for the projects), but the federal government didn't do its part."

Stu Appelbaum, chief of the Corps' Everglades Division, replied that although projects were approved in 2000, Congress didn't readily appropriate money for them.

Pantano added that the projects south of Lake Okeechobee "are the big-ticket items, the ones that cost hundreds of millions of dollars."

