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North Fork tests safe again, but rest of St. Lucie River under health advisory

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06/17/2010
Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers
Andreassi, George

It is again safe to swim in the North Fork of the St. Lucie River, a St. Lucie County health official said Wednesday.

The contamination found earlier this month in the river has cleared up enough to lift the precautionary notice warning people about the presence of bacteria in the North Fork, said Jim Moses, the environmental administrator for the St. Lucie County Health Department.

"It's pretty much back to normal," Moses said.

But a health advisory is still in effect warning the public to avoid contact with the water in the main branch and the South Fork of the St. Lucie River because of blue green algae blooms, said Todd Reinhold, the environmental supervisor for the Martin County Health Department. Contact with the algae can cause skin irritation.

"The algae is more of a chronic condition. It appears we're getting more and more reports of it," Reinhold said.

The public is also advised to continue avoiding contact with the river water near the Roosevelt Bridge because of relatively high bacteria counts, Reinhold said.

Meanwhile, the South Florida Water Management District is trying to figure out ways to reduce the amount of polluted water being released from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie River, said Carol Ann Wehle, the district's executive director.

The releases are necessary to lower the water level in the 730-square mile lake so a big storm does not damage the Herbert Hoover Dike and trigger a life-threatening flood, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Recent water tests at 14 sampling stations in the North Fork of the St. Lucie River showed a decline in the levels of fecal coliform and enterococcus, Moses said. The levels are now in the "good" range.

The Health Department issued a precautionary notice to the public on June 4 advising that higher-than-normal levels of fecal coliform and enterococcus had been found at the 14 sampling stations, Moses said. That is relatively common following heavy rains that wash all sorts of contaminants into the river.

The bacteria indicate the presence of mammal waste in the water, Moses said. The bacteria can cause gastrointestinal illnesses.

Consequently, when health officials find high bacteria levels, they advise the public to be careful about coming in contact with the water while boating, fishing or doing other activities near the river, Moses said.

No significant levels of bacteria were found in routine samplings of St. Lucie beaches, Moses said.

Among the options being considered by water managers to reduce the releases from Lake Okeechobee are alternative water storage and treatment initiatives, such as asking private landowners to hold more storm water on their land or store regional runoff, Wehle said.

Water managers are also trying to determine the feasibility of temporarily storing water on district-owned lands and property set aside for Everglades restoration projects, Wehle said.

In addition, water managers are working with the Army Corps on long-term projects, such as beefing up the dike so the lake can hold more water and completing Everglades restoration projects that will allow more water to flow south from the lake.

Water managers are also in the process of buying land from U.S. Sugar that can be used to store water south of the lake.

OP-ED: Sour grapes should not stop Everglades restoration

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06/17/2010
News-Press
Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Jr.

With all due respect to the Sugar Cane Co-op's elder statesman George Wedgworth, I must take issue with the way that he blatantly misrepresented both my prior statements and U.S. Sugar's current position regarding Everglades restoration. ("U.S. Sugar land buy costly, not needed for Everglades restoration," June 8.)

Wedgworth quoted a 2006 statement I made regarding water storage in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) not solving Lake Okeechobee and the estuary problems.

Back then, South Florida was reeling from multiple hurricanes and their attendant heavy rainfall that resulted in massive, damaging discharges to both the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Coastal residents were outraged and called for sending more water south to be stored in the EAA.

My position in 2006 and now is that those who understand the technical and scientific facts of the South Florida system should understand that the lake suffers from both poor water quality and tremendous stormwater discharges coming from the large watershed north of the lake.

The estuaries suffer from massive discharges of poor quality water from the lake, but a significant volume of poor quality water is also discharged locally between the lake and the estuaries.

Storage of Lake Okeechobee water on U.S. Sugar land or other land is an important and high-priority first step, but without water quality facilities north of the lake and water quality and storage features upstream of the estuaries, Lake

storage alone will not solve all the lake and estuary issues.

This is why I said water storage in the EAA will not solve the Lake Okeechobee and estuary problems. It cannot be the solution alone, but it can be a vital part of the total solution. The other side of the coin is that any solution without a significant EAA component won't solve the problem either.

Understanding these sound science and engineering priorities is why the Florida Legislature stepped in with the Northern Everglades and Estuary Recovery (PEER) plan that committed hundreds of millions of dollars to protect these resources.

In addition, the State and South Florida Water Management District put a billion dollars into restoration projects that benefit Lake Okeechobee and the estuaries on the fast track with their Accelr8 projects.

Today, as Wedgworth admitted, many of those projects are already under way to provide additional storage north of the Lake.

The one indisputable constant, both then and now, is that South Florida's water management system must deal with massive volumes of water in a much smaller natural system than existed historically.

As evidenced by the recent flush of damaging releases from Lake Okeechobee, there remains a vital need for even more water storage and water treatment. From a purely scientific standpoint, storage is storage. Ideally, it would be located close to Lake Okeechobee and be easily connected to other parts of the natural system.

That being said, the main difference between 2006 and today is the presence of a willing seller of large amounts of land south of Lake Okeechobee — U.S. Sugar.

The benefit to the entire system is that our land is located next to the lake and in the natural flow path of the Everglades.

Also, agricultural land south of the lake sells for a fraction of the cost of land north, east or west of Lake Okeechobee.

With nearly 200,000 acres of U.S. Sugar property available, water managers, scientists and engineers can design truly large-scale water storage and treatment projects that will be much more efficient and economic than a bunch of smaller such projects scattered throughout the system.

U.S. Sugar has always believed that sound science and engineering rather than emotion or rhetoric must drive restoration. We believe that still today.

Unfortunately, some of our sugar competitors remain mired in the past and refuse to look beyond their own self-interests. Don't let their sour grapes impede restoration.

— Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Jr., is senior vice president of sugar operations for U.S. Sugar Corp.

SFWMD exploring options for regional water storage

06/16/2010
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With the annual rainy season under way, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is evaluating strategies that could increase regional storage and lessen the volume of future freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries.

"The St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their estuaries are vital to the way of life of residents and businesses on both of Florida's coasts," said SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle. "The options currently under evaluation will not prevent future lake releases by themselves, but they are part of the long-term solution for easing the burden on the estuaries. We recognize that a lot more work needs to be done."

At its May 13 meeting in Stuart, the SFWMD Governing Board heard the concerns of residents on both coasts about the harmful effects of freshwater lake releases on the estuaries. District staff shared information on its alternative water storage and treatment initiative and opportunities to expand shallow water storage on public and private lands. Staff has been building on existing efforts and developing new strategies, including:

• Expanding surface water storage capacity around Lake Okeechobee. Since 2005, the District has been working with a coalition of other agencies, landowners, environmental organizations and researchers to add 127,100 acre-feet of surface water storage capacity on private, public and tribal lands. The District is continuing to evaluate these projects while looking to further expand storage capacity for emergencies and the long term by:

o Determining the feasibility of storing water on District lands and sites set aside for Everglades restoration projects on an interim basis. For viable District and state properties with lessees, the District is asking the lessees to retain more storm water on site. Some District lessees have already made system modifications to retain more storm water. For properties that do not have a lease or reservation, the District is in the process of developing designs, construction and operation cost estimates and schedules.

o Developing a dispersed water and treatment solicitation program to select cost-beneficial projects for implementation to obtain more storage and retention capacity. The District is currently reaching out to private landowners to gauge their interest in holding storm water on their land or storing regional runoff and exploring project concepts.

• Partnering with the City of West Palm Beach on a pilot project to store storm water that would otherwise be lost to tide. The pilot project involves intercepting water from the C-51 canal, which runs parallel to Southern Boulevard, during times when the canal is releasing water to tide. The intercepted storm water would be treated at the city's existing Renaissance Project facility and stored in Clear Lake near Okeechobee Boulevard.

• Partnering in Palm Beach County with Florida Power & Light (FPL) to improve water quality at the L-8 Reservoir and temporarily increase storage capacity. FPL will soon install temporary pumps to use approximately 10 percent of the reservoir water to cool its new West County Energy Center. In early 2011, FPL's reclaimed water system will be in place. Until then, the withdrawals will make room for additional water storage for the District to use during the 2010 rainy season. In addition, the partnership will create an opportunity for rainfall and stormwater runoff to lower chloride levels in the reservoir, allowing it to be used for its intended environmental purpose as part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP).

• Utilizing aquifer storage and recovery (ASR). ASR involves injecting and storing water within underground aquifers until it needs to be recovered. The District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are pilot testing two ASR systems as part of CERP. The most recent test at the Kissimmee River ASR pilot well was able to store 1,500 acre-feet of water.

• Releasing water south to the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) and when capacity is available in the regional system. Over the course of the 2009-2010 dry season, the District sent 73,731 acre-feet of water south from Lake Okeechobee to maintain EAA canal levels, helping to lower the lake level.

o During a recent eight-day combined water supply and water storage release in late May, the combined average flow of water south, as measured at the S-351, S-352 and S-354 structures, was 1,351 cubic feet per second (cfs) per day, or 21,438 total acre-feet. For comparison, the Corps' targets for its most recent round of releases were 1,170 cfs per day to the St. Lucie Estuary and 3,000 cfs per day to the Caloosahatchee Estuary.

In addition to the District's current efforts, the long-term solution for reducing freshwater releases from the lake to the estuaries includes:

• The Corps is continuing its efforts to rehabilitate the 75-year-old Herbert Hoover Dike, which will eventually allow it to safely hold more water in the lake. The Corps recently awarded a $40 million contract for repairs to the most vulnerable section of the dike between Port Mayaca and Belle Glade.

• The completion of CERP projects will enable the District and the Corps to send more clean water south to the Everglades.

• The District's pending purchase of strategically located land owned by the United States Sugar Corporation south of Lake Okeechobee, which would significantly increase water storage south of the lake.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages Lake Okeechobee water levels with the goal of balancing flood control, public safety, navigation, water supply and ecological health. The Corps bases operational decisions — whether to retain or release water in the 730-square-mile lake — on its regulation schedule and the best available science and data provided by its staff and a variety of partners, including the District.

Since late March, the Corps has been periodically releasing water from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries to lower the lake level for the rainy season for public health and safety purposes. During the November-to-May dry season, South Florida received an average of 24.67 inches of rainfall, nearly 6 inches above normal. The water level in Lake Okeechobee reached as high as 15.15 feet in early May. The Corps strives to manage the lake between 12.5 and 15.5 feet to protect the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike.

Details of the goals, roles and responsibilities for managing Lake Okeechobee can be found here: http://www.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/port...

More information about the South Florida Water Management District's efforts to enhance water storage and treatment around Lake Okeechobee is available in this fact sheet: http://www.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/port...

Farm Bureau South Florida Report: EPA Numeric Nutrient Update

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06/15/2010
Southeast AgNet

This in today from Florida Farm Bureau's Charlie Shinn, who keeps pretty close tabs on water goings on in the south Florida region.

EPA Extends Deadlines for Enacting New Numeric Nutrient Criteria in South Florida Waters including Canals

On June 7, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Plaintiffs in the numeric nutrient litigation filed a notice of extension of the Consent Decree deadlines on moving the date from October 15, 2010 to November 14, 2011 for South Florida Waters, including canals. The purpose for the extension is to allow sufficient time for peer-review by EPA's Science Advisory Board of the underlying methodologies, analysis and data to confirm the best available science is being appropriately used to support development of the criteria.

This confirms that EPA is having the same difficulty that Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) was having in deriving limits for nutrients (phosphorus and nitrogen), dissolved oxygen, and chlorophyll that could be statistically significant in our varied waters.

It is especially difficult and I may deem near impossible to derive concentrations of nutrients that are 'natural' in an unnatural water body such as a canal. Although canals have varying levels of biological species (flora and fauna), these cannot be considered natural or background in a structure with the sole purpose of moving water from point A to point B in an efficient, unrestrictive manner.

The final promulgation of numeric nutrient criteria for lakes and flowing waters (streams) did not change and remains October 15, 2010.

Dispersed Storage Remains a Hot Topic at Governing Board Meetings

In several different agenda items, holding waters back on public and private lands to increase regional storage capacity remains a hot topic with governing board members. The goal is to decrease ocean outfall of fresh water by holding additional water where possible, both upstream and downstream of Lake Okeechobee. On private property, holding water for profit has been coined the term 'Water Farming'.

A presentation to the governing board by The Nature Conservancy highlighted specific measures to store water on lands in the Northern Everglades (north of Lake Okeechobee). Goals of the Conservancy besides hydrological restoration are protection and linkage of high quality habitats for threatened and endangered species and the sustainability of the cattle industry in the region.

Florida Farm Bureau remains in favor of water farming as an alternative income stream for farmers where it is feasible and cost effective if issues are resolved to allow the farmer to continue cropping the land once water is removed. These include wetland re-creation and management of threatened or endangered species that may relocate due to the flooded conditions. As this process moves forward, Florida Farm Bureau will remain diligent to make sure that safeguards are in place for farmers that wish to participate. Additionally, we are keeping an eye on the process to insure that current property rights are not threatened. It is a constant process to inform others of the ecological benefits of working ranchlands.

SFWMD FY2010 – 2011 Budget Development

For the past two months, the South Florida Water Management District staff has been briefing the governing board on income and expense projections that will be used to develop next year's budget for the district. As the numbers are presented, the governing board members are starting to grapple with greatly reduced inflows and a cloudy future that includes a potentially busy tropical season as well as Federal Judge Orders and increasing costs for operations and maintenance.

A key component to the budget is cutting expenses to match a 12% ($63 million) loss in ad valorem revenues. This is $100 million loss in ad valorem revenues from two years ago. District staff assured the board that flood control operations will be fully funded as well as the operation and maintenance of the Central & South Florida system.

Construction will continue on projects already initiated such as C-111 and Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (both in Miami/Dade County) but there will be no new construction starts in the proposed budget.

Contained in the current budget planning is a reserve for land and capital projects totaling $321 million. This includes some funding from some State and Federal sources that will likely be cut adjusting the figure to $212 million. It is the recommendation by staff to set these funds aside in a capital reserve pending Federal Court orders and potential U.S. Sugar acquisition. Governing Board member Shannon Estenoz noted that "there is tremendous uncertainty in the Judge's orders but there is certainty of buy and build needed". She further said that she didn't think that $300 million will be enough to cover these orders.

As the financial reality sets in, the process to purchase the current amount of property in the U.S. Sugar Corporation contract is slowing to a standstill. In response, the district has suspended all 'River of Grass' workshops.

Monthly Reports Available on Florida Farm Bureau Federation's Website

This report is also available on Florida Farm Bureau Federation's website (www.floridafarmbureau.org). Click on 'Issues and Public Policy' on the left side of the home page, then click on the 'Water and Natural Resources' subheading.

If you do not wish to receive this report in the future or are receiving multiple copies, please contact me (charles.shinn@ffbf.org).

Onetime landfill site to help restore Everglades

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06/14/2010
Sun Sentinel
Reid, Andy

BOCA RATON — Land west of Boca Raton once pegged for yet another South Florida dumping ground is now on its way to becoming a reservoir that helps boost Everglades water supplies.

More than 20 years ago, residents who didn't want a landfill near their neighborhoods convinced Palm Beach County to find a new spot to bury their trash.

Then the South Florida Water Management District acquired the land next to the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge — the northern reaches of the Everglades — with plans to use it for water storage and treatment.

Financial delays put the 1,800-acre restoration project on the shelf, until President Barack Obama's economic stimulus program last year started pumping overdue federal money into Everglades projects.

On Thursday, officials with the water management district and the Army Corps of Engineers signed a project partnership agreement spelling out the funding and construction plans for the land where a landfill was once envisioned.

"Now it's going to be a reservoir helping the Everglades," Army Corps spokeswoman Nanciann Regalado said. "That's pretty cool."

Work on the reservoir could begin as early as September.

On June 26, the Army Corps will host a community meeting to discuss details about the project. The meeting starts at 6:30 p.m. at Lakeside Terrace, 7880 Glades Road. For information, call the Army Corps at 904-334-8954.

After nearly a decade of the federal government failing to deliver its share of the 50-50 cost-sharing with the state that was agreed to for Everglades restoration, the recent influx of money is a welcome change, said Drew Martin of the Sierra Club.

"It's a good step in the right direction," Martin said about the reservoir, called the Site 1 Impoundment Project. "We want to encourage them to use as much land as they can for the environment."

The 221-square-mile Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in western Palm Beach County is a remnant of the Everglades' famed "River of Grass" that once stretched from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay. The refuge provides vital animal habitat, but its waters also get tapped to boost drinking water supplies.

The goal of the reservoir planned beside the refuge is to hold onto some of the stormwater runoff that now gets drained out to sea through water management district canals to protect South Florida communities from flooding.

The reservoir would be built above ground, with berms holding a pool of water about 8 feet deep. It would collect stormwater draining in near the Hillsboro Canal and also capture releases of excess water from the refuge and Lake Okeechobee that would otherwise end up drained out to sea.

The reservoir could hold on to water during wet times and release it during dry weather to restock groundwater supplies. It fits into a larger restoration plan aimed at delivering the quantity, quality and timing of water the remaining Everglades needs to survive.

"This will reduce the need to remove clean water from the refuge for water supply and allow that water to remain in the refuge and flow south," said Ken Ammon, the district's deputy executive director who oversees Everglades restoration projects.

The project is expected to cost $118 million, including the $8.4 million cost of the land. The federal stimulus money pays for the first phase of construction.

This upcoming groundbreaking, like others for several Everglades projects throughout South Florida during the past year, is a welcome change from the roadblocks that remain for restoration.

The struggling economy and drop in tax revenue have the water management district scaling back its construction plans. Financial concerns are also threatening the district's pending $536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland for Everglades restoration.

In addition, a federal judge has ordered the district to resume construction on a much larger, unfinished Everglades restoration reservoir in southwestern Palm Beach County.

The district had already invested nearly $280 million of taxpayers' money in the more than 16,000-acre reservoir west

of U.S. 27 when work stopped two years ago. The project has remained on hold while the agency tried to complete the land deal with U.S. Sugar.

Opponents of the U.S. Sugar land deal say it threatens to siphon money from overdue Everglades projects and add to restoration delays.

The district wants to turn that unfinished reservoir into a stormwater treatment area and put reservoirs on the U.S. Sugar land. But first, the district must convince the federal judge that the U.S. Sugar deal is worth the wait.

Building more facilities to store and clean the stormwater that rains down on South Florida each year has long been billed as the way to protect South Florida drinking water supplies and to address the damage from decades of draining the Everglades.

"Clean water is a key to Everglades restoration," District Board Chairman Eric Buermann said in a written release trumpeting the deal signed Thursday. "Projects that focus on improving water quality ... are the tools that will help us achieve restoration goals."

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