

## **\$19 Million for waterway projects sought from state**

**By Rachel Simmons**

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When state lawmakers reconvene in Tallahassee next year, they'll get their biggest request yet from a group of agencies aiming to restore the St. Lucie Estuary and the Indian River Lagoon.

The St. Lucie River Issues Team will ask for more than \$19 million to help pay for 29 projects in Martin and St. Lucie counties that include dredging a waterway and upgrading local drainage systems, as well as studies of things like nutrient levels in tributaries and discharges from Lake Okeechobee.

The request amounts to nearly \$3 million more than lawmakers allotted this year for the team, which comprises 17 state, local and federal agencies and groups like the St. Lucie River Initiative and the Rivers Coalition.

"I personally believe that having the consensus of 17 different groups really shows how important these projects are," Kathy LaMartina, a program coordinator with the South Florida Water Management District, said about the team's success.

Since its creation in 1998, the team has received \$52 million from the legislature that has helped pay for more than 94 projects in Martin and St. Lucie counties, LaMartina said.

The team meets each year to compile and rank a list of short-term projects, which require local matches. The list is submitted to state lawmakers for funding. Last year, the team asked for \$18.2 million; it received more than \$16 million, LaMartina said.

The most recent round of requests includes \$150,000 to allow the water management district to monitor 19 tributaries of the St. Lucie Estuary, including the Bessey, Danforth and Five Mile creeks. By measuring things like nitrogen and phosphorus, scientists can learn whether

septic tanks or lawn fertilizer are contributing to pollution and harmful algae blooms in the estuary, said Boyd Gunsalus, a biologist with the water management district.

Another \$185,000 would go toward a district study of Lake Okeechobee discharges. Using a computer model, the study would look at whether periodic discharges or a constant low-level flow from the lake would be better for fish and plants in the St. Lucie Estuary, district spokeswoman Julie Greenberg said.

The team also is seeking \$1.3 million to dredge the Manatee Pocket in Martin County and more than \$2 million to upgrade storm-water drainage systems.

"The idea is to take that storm water that would normally dump straight into the river and instead hold that water, treat that water, then slowly release it," said Paul Millar, water resource manager for Martin County.

An additional \$237,000 would help the county and Stuart install baffle boxes, large concrete rectangular boxes that are placed underground at an outfall to a river or creek. Inside the boxes are two or three chambers that collect sediment as the water passes through, preventing silt and garbage from ending up in the St. Lucie River, said Sam Amerson, public works director for the city, which already has 21 boxes in place.