

Army Corps of Engineers open to ag land flow-way for Lake Okeechobee

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January 31, 2006

Talk of moving more water south from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades Agricultural Area isn't anything new — unless it's coming from a top official with the Army Corps of Engineers.

But that's exactly what Dennis Duke, the corps' project manager for ecosystem restoration, said needs to happen.

"You've got to have flow-ways through the EAA," Duke said. "It's not just necessary, it's a requirement. It's an abomination what we've done to the natural system."

Calls for new ways to move water south of the lake — instead of flushing it into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers — have been part of the Everglades restoration discussion for years. After last year's poor water conditions, even more environmental activists signed on to the idea.

Duke's comments, which were first expressed last week at the annual Everglades Coalition conference, came as a pleasant surprise to river advocates who've become used to quick dismissal of the idea.

"That was the first time I heard that being proposed by an agency, the potential for some kind of flow-way," said Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society. "We're excited. This is the start of a dialogue that can move us in the right direction."

In an interview Monday, Duke said he supported a flow-way through the sugar fields as a way to move more water from the lake into a large reservoir being built in the southern end of the fields and the storm water treatment areas, which state water managers plan to expand beginning later this month.

The southern flow would be especially important if the hundreds of proposed underground aquifer water storage wells don't work, he said.

But Duke's concept of a flow-way differs from what Perry and other activists envision.

Perry said a flow-way should be a wide, shallow area with plants, which would help clean polluting nutrients from the water while slowly moving it south toward the Everglades.

Duke said the flow-way should be a significantly larger canal — maybe an additional 100 to 200 feet across — that can move water quickly away from the lake and the estuaries.

"We're going to have to fix the southern end of the lake even if we provide more storage to the north, to get more water south," he said. "And it needs to be more environmentally friendly than flushing it with large pumps."

Although he announced the idea at the coalition meeting, Duke said it needed to be studied before water managers accepted it as an official goal.

The idea is often rebuked, he added, because it comes across as "buy the EAA because we don't like sugar."

But water managers and activists agree the future of the 700,000-acre agricultural area is critical to Everglades restoration, Perry said.

"I don't care if it were potatoes growing in there, or if it were corn or wheat," he said. "Environmentally, it wouldn't matter what kind of crop. It's blocking the sheet flow that was prior to agriculture there. We need to get it back."