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Sanibel official: Nothing has changed in water management, releases

Future plans for Lake O, Caloosahatchee good, Sanibel vice mayor says, but a lack of short-term planning could mean another hurricane season of algae blooms, foul water and dead fish.

By Charlie Whitehead

Friday, April 21, 2006

If what happened last year happens again this year, then what happened last year will happen again this year.

That's what Sanibel Vice Mayor Mick Denham told the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council about the Caloosahatchee River and Lake Okeechobee on Thursday. Fresh off meeting with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials, Denham says the future restoration plans are well and good, but nothing has changed for the short-term.

"It's clear to me that nothing's changed since last year," Denham said. "No changes in water management. No changes in release schedule. No reason to believe the releases to the estuary will be any different than last year."

An active hurricane season last year not only overfilled the lake but also stirred up decades' worth of polluted sediment that flowed down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers when the Corps ordered releases. In Lee County, the resulting algae blooms fouled the water and killed fish along the coast, sparking public and local government outcry.

The Corps manages the lake level to prevent flooding around the lake. The agency had hoped to lower the lake level to 12½ feet and keep it there for a year, but Denham said the current lake elevation is slightly higher than 14 feet.

"That's exactly where we were last year before the hurricanes hit us," Denham said.

Rhonda Haag, director of the South Florida Water Management District's lower west coast service center in Fort Myers, is an RPC member and was sitting next to Denham when he voiced his concerns. She said it's true that another heavy wet season would mean lake releases. The district advises the Corps of Engineers, which owns the flood control structures and makes the operating decisions.

"There are a lot of projects that are in the process of being planned or constructed," she said.

The kind of huge, multi-million dollar projects that are needed and planned for Everglades restoration take years to plan and carry out. The Corps of Engineers is considering changes to the way it manages the lake, changes that could save the estuaries the pounding they took last year.

The schedule doesn't call for implementing the changes until 2007, however. That means there have been virtually no structural or regulatory changes since this time last year.

"It's because of the nature of the beast," Haag said.