

Lake O release schedule draws ire

Bonita Daily News

Residents, local leaders speak out against Army Corps of Engineers' plan

By Julio Ochoa

Thursday, July 13, 2006

Local leaders and residents weren't satisfied with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' explanation that a new plan for the release of Lake Okeechobee water will be less detrimental to the Caloosahatchee estuary.

In a workshop to reveal the new plan, which calls for keeping the lake at lower levels, more than 100 residents got to have their say, although some believed it would do little to slow the flow of polluted water west.

"I realize this is probably a charade for you," said Carla Johnston, mayor of Sanibel. "You're probably planning tomorrow's golf game ... but, hopefully, you will listen." Johnston and others laid out what they believed were several problems with the Army Corps' selected plan, known as the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule.

After a public hearing process, the Army Corps will implement the new schedule in January and use it to regulate releases from the lake until 2010. The schedule calls for the Army Corps to keep the maximum level of the lake below 17.25 feet. That is more than a foot lower than the current maximum level of 18.5 feet, meaning the lake can hold 190 billion fewer gallons.

That could cause a greater frequency of polluted water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee estuary, said Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah. Heavy flows of polluted water from Lake Okeechobee are damaging to the estuary, killing oysters, shrimp, blue crabs, sea grass and fish, and causing blooms of toxic blue-green algae.

Some scientists believe the releases also make red tide in the Gulf of Mexico worse. Army Corps engineers came up with the lower level after studying what possibly could happen to the dike around the lake if the area were to endure a direct hit from a strong hurricane, said Dennis Duke, head of the Everglades restoration program for the Army Corps' Jacksonville district.

The probability of the dike failing when the lake's level is at 18 feet is 10 percent, Duke said. When the lake's level is at 21 feet, the probability that the dike will fail goes up to 100 percent, he said.

"Our No. 1 priority is the safety of the people living to the immediate south of the dike," Duke said.

Other priorities include managing the lake at lower levels and reducing high releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. But the plan fails to meet the Army Corps' own objectives, Johnston said. When the Army Corps releases more than 21,000 gallons of lake water per second to the Caloosahatchee, it strains the estuary. Releases of more than 34,000 gallons per second cause severe damage.

The current schedule causes releases to exceed 34,000 gallons per second for 34 months over a 36-year period. The proposed schedule calls for releases to exceed 34,000 gallons per second for 37 months over the same time period. It would, however, reduce medium releases of 21,000 to 34,000 gallons per second by about 3 percent and improve conditions during dry season by using small-pulse releases to keep salt water from coming too far upriver.

The Army Corps identified several alternatives, the worst of which was no action, Duke said. The schedule it chose was not the best or worst for the lake's health, but it was one of the best for the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, Duke said. To residents who spoke Wednesday, it looked the same or worse than no action. If something doesn't change for the better, the area will face severe economic effects, said William Selesky, director of operations for Carroll Property Investments Inc., which runs several hotels on Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel.

"When a cancellation happens because of sludge on beaches, it has an economic impact that is further-reaching than just hotels," Selesky said.

All coastal and inland businesses suffer, he said. The polluted lake releases also affect Selesky's son, who suffers from asthma, he said.

"He has difficulty going out to the beach when we have sludge and we end up taking him to hospital," Selesky said. "At the end of the day everyone has to look at themselves in the mirror and hopefully make the right choices for what's better for ourselves and our families."

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Published in Bonita Springs, Florida, USA by the E.W. Scripps Co.