

River advocates call for Lake O reforms

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By Kate Spinner

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Overlooking the Caloosahatchee River from Centennial Park in Fort Myers, environmental advocates lamented the river's declining health with a faint glimmer of hope for the future.

Drawing widespread attention to the river's plight, national environmental group American Rivers ranked the Caloosahatchee as seventh on its annual endangered rivers list, which came out Wednesday.

"I'm ticked off," said Ralph Brooks, an environmental attorney who has seen the river and the local economy become "devastated" over the past decade. "We need to stop the mismanagement of Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades system. I want to see my toes on Sanibel again. I want to see pelicans diving with terns in the river for fish. I want to see flats boats right behind me like I once did fishing for tarpon. All I see now is emptiness."

Speaking before a crowd of local media at the park, environmentalists said they hope the attention from American Rivers fosters the adoption of better water quality policies and brings more funding for projects that would bounce the river back to health.

Jennifer Hecker, natural resources policy manager for The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, said the river needs immediate help.

"The Caloosahatchee River and estuary is the lifeblood of our regional economy, our environment and our quality of life. To have it sacrificed as a disposal conduit for the polluted waters held in Lake Okeechobee is unacceptable to the communities of Southwest Florida," Hecker said. "What we need is fundamental reform in how Lake Okeechobee is managed, so that it is managed more as a lake rather than as a reservoir."

More than a century of environmental manipulation in South Florida has damaged the lake and the river. An earthen dam surrounds the lake to keep its waters from spilling south as they did historically. Now farm fields and communities sit in about half of the lake's original floodplain, which was once part of the Everglades.

Water managers - the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District - send that water to sea, through the Caloosahatchee River on the west coast and the St. Lucie canal on the east. Through the \$10.8 billion Everglades restoration plan, efforts are under way to reroute some of the water south and store the rest in the lake and in above ground reservoirs and underground aquifers.

But Wednesday, Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah, Brooks and leaders of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Audubon of Florida, Audubon of Southwest Florida, the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation and Caloosahatchee Riverwatch said the restoration projects are not big enough.

Paul Gray, a Lake Okeechobee expert with Audubon of Florida, said enough water drained into the lake from its northern watershed to raise it six feet last year and the year before. But, he said, restoration plans north of the lake would provide just eight inches of water storage.

Without adequate storage in the system, the water that enters the lake is flushed to sea as waste. Last year 696 billion gallons of dirty lake water pummeled the Caloosahatchee estuary. The releases carry polluted sediments that cause blue-green algae blooms in the river and cloud out sea grasses in the estuary. Sea grass beds provide nursery grounds for small and juvenile fish and food for manatees.

"If you can only catch eight inches, we are going to have a very, very large problem even after the Lake Okeechobee part of the restoration is done," Gray said.

He and Andrew McElwaine, president of the Conservancy, said more reservoirs and water treatment marshes need to be built south of the lake too.

Hecker said the river's problems are not just Lake Okeechobee's. She said about half the dirty water that courses through the river is from its own watershed.

She and Mary Rawl, president of Riverwatch, said communities along the river need to retrofit old wastewater systems and immediately set better water quality standards for new development.

In addition, Hecker and Erick Lindblad, president of the Conservation Foundation, said that while the river is damaged from excessive discharges in the rainy season, it is also damaged in the dry season by lack of water.

Hecker said the river needs more assurance that it will receive water when it is needed.

Last week, Steve Sentef, lead regulatory representative with the water management district's west coast office, said the district is spending millions to retrofit the stormwater systems of old communities along the Caloosahatchee and to build more treatment marshes as new municipal parks and athletic fields are built. The district also spent about \$450,000 to restore one of the river's original bends in Hendry County and it will spend nearly the same amount to revive another bend.

The Army Corps is also changing the way it sends water to the river.

With the changes in the works, Hecker said there is really no better time than now to call attention to the river's problems through the American Rivers endangered list.

"This designation is a call to action and the time for action is now," Hecker said.

Gray said nursing the river back to health will take time. After all, he said, it took 100 years to bring the river to its current state.

"It's already too late," Gray said after the press conference. "We're in a remedial stage. We're trying to clean up past problems. We're going to continue to have really bad conditions until we get most of the stuff (with Everglades restoration) in the ground."