

Panel considers amending Lake O restoration bill to add protections for Caloosahatchee amendment to existing legislation has better chance of passing than a separate bill, panel member says.

**By Julio Ochoa
Bonita News
Monday, November 6, 2006**

Hope for the health of the Caloosahatchee River may be on the horizon.

A river advisory group created by the Legislature is considering adding some language to a Lake Okeechobee restoration bill that would call for similar protections to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

An amendment to an existing bill may have a better chance than a new bill of passing through the Legislature, said Lee County commissioner Tammy Hall, who serves on the Caloosahatchee/St. Lucie Rivers Corridor Advisory Committee.

"We already have a framework so an amendment might be a more productive way to go," Hall said. "Whenever you can dovetail onto something already existing, I think your chances of getting it passed are better."

The Lake Okeechobee Protection Program was created in 2004 and requires specific projects to restore the health of the lake, which has been polluted from years of runoff. Many Lee County residents blame water-quality problems here on fresh-water discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee.

The bill requires the South Florida Water Management District to deliver a report to the Legislature every three years on the program's progress and whether it is meeting specific goals, said Susan Gray, deputy director of the district's watershed management department.

The program already mentions restrictions on diversions to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers but does not go into specifics.

"That act requires the state government to prioritize certain things for Lake Okeechobee protection," said Ryder Rudd, executive director of the river advisory committee.

"The committee is looking to expand that protection, which would require specific projects that fall on that priority list."

An amendment could include projects such as adding a water-quality component to a planned reservoir on the west coast, Hall said. It could also call for additional water storage to hold runoff or discharges from Lake Okeechobee, she said.

It could also be more vague so new ideas could be incorporated in the future, she said.

Most importantly, the addition to the bill would bring the estuaries' issues to the forefront of leaders' minds.

"This is a way for estuary protection issues to have some

accountability," Hall said. "Someone has to be accountable."

Legislators created the 17-member advisory council during the 2006 session. The governor and legislative leaders appointed its members, who come from diverse backgrounds, including tourism, agriculture, business and leaders from affected cities and counties.

The committee's charge is to find solutions, which haven't been considered by other groups, to the estuaries' problems.

The committee will submit a report recommending how to mitigate ecological effects of lake discharges to the governor and Legislature by February.

So far, the idea to amend the existing Lake Okeechobee bill has gained the most support, Rudd said.

The committee will meet three more times before February to hammer out the amendment's details or come up with other ideas.