

## Concern for the Caloosahatchee draws 300

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Originally posted on October 30, 2006

### DOCUMENTARY EXPLORES RIVER

The documentary "The Caloosahatchee: River at a Crossroads" is available for \$18 and can be ordered online at [wgcu.org](http://wgcu.org) or by calling (888) 824-0030.

Grasping a bag of algae and complaining about hundreds of dead fish, Sanibel resident Will Compton wanted some answers from six panelists who discussed the future of the Caloosahatchee River on Sunday at the Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa.

Compton, one of about 300 people who attended the gathering sponsored by Florida Gulf Coast University's public radio station WGCU, left without the answers he sought.

"Something is causing this," Compton said. "There were hundreds of dead fish in a one-block area."

Panelist Andrew McElwaine, director of The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, said a slow hurricane season means freshwater releases from Lake Ochechobee into the river are not the likely culprit.

Excess fresh water can disturb the saltwater-freshwater balance of the river, and nutrient-laden fresh water released from the lake has triggered massive micro- and macroalgal blooms. Microalgae causes fish kills. Blooms can block sunlight, which stresses seagrasses and smothers seagrass beds.

But these fish kills could be blamed on poor stormwater management, McElwaine said.

After watching a 26-minute documentary titled "The Caloosahatchee: River at a Crossroads," Sanibel resident Jessica Simmonds-Short, whose 10 year old, asked panelists whether they knew the extent of the damage the lake water releases caused the estuaries.

"The answer is 'yes,'" said Dennis Duke, chief of the South Florida Everglades Ecosystem Restoration Division of the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "A loss of seagrass. Wildlife. Fish kills. Algae blooms.

"We have a lot of visible evidence of what is going on here," Duke said.

Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah, a panelist, said the film what many already know.

"I think we realize we are experiencing a tremendous tragedy," he said.

"What is deeply troubling is there doesn't seem to be an understanding by authorities that the estuaries need relief. People should not have to live in a polluted environment."

While all the panelists agreed there was a problem, they were unable to agree on a solution.

Some suggested building reservoirs to hold excess water, while others wanted all of the releases directed instead to the Everglades.

"We know what the problems are," said Rae Ann Wessel, natural resource policy director of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. "We know, and for the most part agree, what some of the solutions are. The challenge is in the details of how we get there."