

Published: May 10, 2006 - 02:34:51 pm EDT

Counties share lake worries

By Patty Brant

County commissioners from both Hendry and Glades are very aware that a lot of eyes are watching Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee River, the two major waterways shared by both counties. The two boards met at the Dallas B. Townsend Ag Building in LaBelle May 2, in what was likely the first-ever joint workshop meeting between the two boards.

As Hendry County Attorney Kate English put it: There is a clear concern among all the communities around the lake, but it's not clear how to fix it. "It amounts to 'micromanaging a macro-system,'" she said. What is clear is the politics of this complex issue: the coasts are concerned about their respective estuaries and don't understand the rural half of the equation.

South Florida Water Management District personnel explained that Lake Okeechobee's uses have expanded over the years, adding more stress to the lake and its dike.

The Kissimmee River Restoration, part of the entire Everglades Restoration project, has reached a milestone with completion of the first part. The use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) are in place there to help decrease phosphorous runoff, a main cause of pollution that eventually makes its way to the coastal estuaries by way of the Big Lake, then east through the St. Lucie Canal and west through the Caloosahatchee River. Excessive amounts of nutrients in the water have severely damaged the lake, the river and the estuaries, creating a situation in which multiple counties with conflicting needs will be forced to work together for a solution. As neighbors with much in common, Hendry and Glades must use their common issues as their strength.

Hendry County Commissioner Bill Maddox asked if dredging might help restore Lake Okeechobee to health. Glades County Commissioner Alvin Ward said his county is seriously looking at restoring the lake n a project he said would be the largest environmental clean up in the United States. He said Lee County Commission chairman Hall has pledged support, knowing it affects them downriver. Commissioner Ward continued by saying they have asked Governor Bush to support a an application for a 25-year dredging permit from the Department of Environmental Protection. DEP, he noted, will be the biggest hurdle in that attempt.

Glades Commissioner Russell Echols wanted to know why the Hoover Dike, which surrounds Lake Okeechobee, is being surveyed. He pointed out that last year SFWMD's governing board assured the county the dike would withstand a category 5 hurricane. He called it "disconcerting" that, just a few short months and a major hurricane later, that assessment has changed.

Glades County Commission Chair Butch Jones said his board has met with numerous agencies that say the levy can be compromised; in fact it was almost breached last year during Hurricane Wilma. The dike was built in the 1930s of sand, silt, rocks, shell and the like.

Hendry County Commissioners Kevin McCarthy was concerned about the impact of lowering the lake level while Bo Pelham asked if there would be an emergency management report before hurricane season. The answers to both questions were: unknown.