

Dry spell helps Lake O reach level set by Army Corps

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For the first time since Hurricane Wilma swept through the region in October, the water level in Lake Okeechobee is exactly where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wants it to be and closer to where the South Florida Water Management District wants it.

On Friday, the lake's elevation reached 14 feet above sea level, about a foot lower than it was this time last year.

The Army Corps set a goal in October to reach 14 feet by May 1, in hopes of avoiding a summer deluge of lake releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

"We had a plan and we operated in accordance with that plan and Mother Nature helped," said Sean Smith, chief of water resource engineering with the Army Corps office in Jacksonville. "It helped us that we had somewhat of a drier period of time."

Lake Okeechobee is managed more like a reservoir than a natural lake, with heavy demands placed on it for water supply and flood control. When the lake drops too low, farmers south of the lake run the chance of lost crops due to water shortages. Municipalities around the lake also tap it for drinking water.

At the same time, if the lake gets too high, the water starts to stress the Herbert Hoover Dike, which surrounds it. To avoid dike failure, the Corps flushes excess water from the lake out to sea by way of the Caloosahatchee River on the west coast and the St. Lucie Canal on the east.

Last year, the Army Corps flushed 696 billion gallons of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River, upsetting the estuary's salinity balance and adding murky water and algae-causing nutrients into the system.

Water managers are trying to keep the lake lower going into the rainy season to avoid the need for damaging releases to the estuaries.

The water management district would have preferred to see the lake drop to 12 feet by now, but Hurricane Wilma thwarted that plan in October, said Kurt Harclerode, district spokesman.

Harclerode said the district is pleased the Army Corps reached the 14-foot alternative goal, which was established after rain from Hurricane Wilma rose the lake level from 15.5 feet to 17.1 feet virtually overnight.

As the dry season nears its end, Harclerode said water managers are concerned about potential water shortages. But, he said, water managers don't start talking about drought until dry creeps into June.

To keep the estuaries healthy, however, the district is likely to request that the Army Corps sends very low-level releases from the lake into the Caloosahatchee River until the rainy season begins.

"It's always walking that tightrope. You want to make sure you have enough supply if the rains do not come in June," Harclerode said.

The Army Corps has been releasing small amounts of water to the estuary throughout the dry season this year. The minimal flow helped lower the lake and are also keeping the estuary from becoming too salty.

After large releases pummeled the estuary last year, scientists were unsure whether sea grasses would be able to recover. Steve Bortone, a biologist with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, said salinity in the estuary is great, water clarity is good and sea grasses are growing back. The trick, Bortone said, will be keeping the water clear so that the grasses can continue to grow strong. He said at this point, clear water is more important for the grasses than salinity.

In large volumes, the murky lake water clouds the estuaries and prevents underwater grasses from tapping the sun to synthesize food. Prolonged periods in fresh water also stresses sea grasses, which are the root of the aquatic food chain.

Paul Gray, Lake Okeechobee watershed program director for Audubon of Florida, said he's glad to hear that the lake is a foot lower than it was this time last year.

"We're ahead of schedule and the lower the lake goes into the summer, the more storage capacity it has," Gray said. "The more cushion we can get, the better."

Gray said it would be ideal to get the lake down the 13 feet before summer rains begin to fall. The best-case scenario would be a summer of average weather, where the lake rises no higher than 15 feet.