

Guest columnist:

Florida can't wait for federal funding to act

By Nathaniel P. Reed
guest columnist

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The near collapse of the Hoover Dike, the need to keep a far lower lake stage to avoid a repeat of the New Orleans disaster puts Stuart and Martin County along with our friends at the Gulf end of the Caloosahatchee River in the unenviable position of having our rivers continued to be used as sewers.

The current situation is intolerable and the excuses for inaction are equally intolerable.

The governor and the Florida Legislature must face the problem that federal dollars are going to be in short supply for many years, as the total expenses of the Afghan-Iraqi wars threaten the financial stability of our country.

We cannot wait indefinitely for federal funding to face up to major Florida environmental crises even if uninformed actions of the Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District are the cause of many of our local and South Florida problems.

I call your attention to the clear violations of the federal and state water quality acts. It is an environmental crime to discharge billions of gallons of polluted water down Lake Okeechobee's two outlets after serious miscalculations by the District and the Corps allowed the lake to become overfilled with rainwater and runoff.

The problems are great, but we have suffered through 40 years of studies, commissions, hand wringing and little action.

I know from firsthand experience that several of the so called Lake Okeechobee Study Committees were "stacked" and rendered meaningless reports designed to stall any and all effective corrective measures.

Clearly, the solution not only to the gross pollution problems that have engulfed the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers are:

The continuing pollution loads in the Okeechobee watershed must become a priority for Department of Environmental Protection, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, SFWMD and Department of Community Affairs. The buck has been passed back and forth. The failure of the state to come to grips with the tidal wave of phosphorus that threatens Lake Okeechobee with a Lake Apopka future is real. The time clock is ticking! I suggest the appointment of a highly competent, concerned individual, in the governor's office, enjoying both the governor's and the Legislature confidence and support is the only way that the often conflicting views of the concerned agencies will ever be united in the common cause of significantly reducing the phosphorus loads entering Lake Okeechobee.

Storage. If the lake must be managed at a lower level, then upstream and Everglades Agricultural Area storage must compensate for the loss of lake storage. It's as simple as that, but the District, DEP and the Corps have dragged their collective feet studying to death and failing to accept the fact that with a forced lower lake schedule, thousands of acre-feet of water must be stored or it will inevitably have to be released to the Atlantic and Gulf through the two blighted rivers.

Why can't the state examine the benefits of a third outlet and major reservoirs systems in the EAA?

Ask yourselves: Are you willing to heed the commands of Big Sugar and ignore the stark fact of life that Okeechobee's excess water went and still goes south?

Yes, a third outlet and surface reservoirs will take up considerable amounts of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area, but the options are limited. If you comply with Big Sugar's intentions of blocking any consideration of a third outlet, then you turn your backs on your far more numerous coastal constituents who demand relief.

My final plea: Become aware of the opportunities of re-watering Florida Bay by recreating natural flows in the C-111 basin in south Dade County. Rarely has an opportunity of such magnitude been available for everglades restoration.

I urge you to understand the opportunity, and ignore the expense of acquiring the needed land — move this project ahead. It is an opportunity that comes rarely to a member of the South Florida delegation.

Reed is a businessman and conservationist whose family founded Jupiter Island. He formerly served on the SFWMD board.