

Guest Opinion: Darrell R. Harris

## **Lake dike danger should be chief concern**

We understand the worry of Sanibel Island residents over the degradation of their waters. But the relief they seek is potentially life - threatening for lake region residents.

By Darrell R. Harris

Guest Opinion

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It was with great concern that residents of Hendry County read stories this week regarding safety issues related to the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee. Reports of the potential for disastrous consequences to the people of Hendry County resulting from breaches in the dike is an issue that must be addressed at all levels.

I applaud the leadership of Gov. Jeb Bush for bringing the public safety issues related to Lake Okeechobee to the forefront. We, as public officials, have a responsibility to do what is necessary to protect the lives and the property of those we serve. It will take a united effort among the local, state and federal government to ensure that everything possible is done to provide as safe an environment as possible to our constituents. It is our duty to do no less.

The likelihood of the failure of the Herbert Hoover Dike increases as water levels rise in Lake Okeechobee. During the rainy season, the Corps of Engineers often must make releases from the lake to keep lake levels in check. The Corps is working on a plan that could keep the lake lower year-round, and expects to publish a draft in July and put the plan into effect in January. While we support managing the lake at a lower level, with the recent report of the potential for dike failure, we believe it behooves the Corps to keep levels within the lake low enough during this coming rainy season so as not to threaten the dike's integrity.

### **DANGER TO ESTUARY**

With these critical public safety issues in mind, it was also with great concern that we read of the intention of the City Council members of Sanibel to pursue legal action against the agencies responsible for making releases from Lake Okeechobee. Council members have indicated that they will request an injunction to have releases to the Caloosahatchee River stopped to protect the waters around Sanibel Island.

We in Hendry County understand the incredible stress that the Caloosahatchee estuary has experienced over the past several years. The numerous hurricanes and heavy rains have affected all of us, and given us a greater understanding of the link between the coastal and lake regions. Hendry County residents, like the residents in Lee County and Sanibel Island, want

to preserve the precious natural environment that we all enjoy. We fish in your estuary, stay in your hotels and shell on your islands. We, too, are a part of Southwest Florida.

### **DANGER TO PEOPLE**

We understand the worry of Sanibel Island residents who do not want to see the degradation of their waters. What we cannot understand is the relief that they seek results in a potentially life-threatening prospect for lake region residents. We cannot protect environmental resources at the potential cost of human life. That is not acceptable.

While the fixes to the problems that we experience in the lake and estuary will not happen overnight, we are encouraged by the action we see occurring in our backyard. The South Florida Water Management District broke ground on a reservoir in Hendry County that will hold excess water so high-level discharges will be less likely to occur. While the benefits of this reservoir will be experienced by the lake and coastal regions alike, the cost of removing over 10,000 acres of taxable land is being assumed by Hendry County.

We will continue to work with the various state agencies and the federal government to promote and implement environmental restoration projects and will robustly demand that public safety issues will be afforded the highest priority. We hope, too, that all governments and residents of Southwest Florida will do the same.

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