

Senator visits SWFL, discusses poor water issues

Written by: Kathryn Simmons | Publication: NBC 2 News

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LEE COUNTY, FL - The newly appointed head of the Republican Party visited Southwest Florida to discuss local issues that need national attention. Senator Mel Martinez explained one of his top priorities in Washington is to bring back federal dollars to clean up area waterways. He also spoke extensively about finding alternative fuel sources and the role our area could play in that search.

Martinez met with several groups in Southwest Florida on Tuesday – spending the morning in Lee County and the afternoon in Collier.

Senator Martinez told Lee County leaders point blank there is a problem with the health of our waterways - including the Caloosahatchee River and the Gulf of Mexico. Now, the question is what kind of money Southwest Florida can get from Washington to clear up the murky water.

There is not much debate that red tide kills fish and pushes tourists away.

"It's changed, more frequent, it's more severe, and it affects more people. Our tourists leave and when they leave, that's the economic impact of Lee County," said Fran Meyers, of the Lee County Tourist Development Council.

Many people just want to know what is to blame for the poor water conditions. Martinez says he knows Southwest Floridians need an answer before the water gets worse.

"There's no question that there's a problem - a problem that demands an answer. The answer to me lies in the Water Resources Act that we need to get out of Congress. That will provide funding," said Martinez.

He went on to say better research is needed as well.

"There has to be better science on the issue relating to red tide," said Martinez.

Lee County Commissioner Tammy Hall says she hopes Washington is the key to solving Southwest Florida water problems.

"Our water here is not good. I moved here in 1978. Going up the Caloosahatchee - the water was blue-green. Now, it's a murky brown," said Hall.

Martinez said the Water Resources Act almost passed in Congress this year. He says he is confident there will be a renewed effort with the new Congress when they start the next session on January 9.

That message resonated with business leaders in Collier County as well. Many of them know that the environment is key to economic growth in our area.

Martinez spoke to a group at the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce.

Mike Regan is the head of the Chamber.

"The Senator's visit shows the growing influence of our area," said Regan.

He also added that it is important for decision makers in Washington, like Senator Martinez, to see first hand the issues facing our area.

Environmental leaders agree.

"I'm happy as a clam," said Andrew McElwaine, head of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

He was pleased to hear Martinez focus on environmental issues like water quality and alternative fuels.

McElwaine pointed out that the Water Resources Act would bring more than \$300 million to Collier County to help clean up the Southern Golden Gate Estates and restore the Picayune Strand to its natural state.

He says Martinez' leadership will be important in the effort and trips like this are a good opportunity for him to see the projects importance to our area.

The Senator agreed saying when you represent 17 million people like he does – you have to get out of Washington to truly understand the issues.

Martinez also told the group at the Chamber that it is time for a change of direction in Iraq and one will be coming soon. Another issue he discussed was immigration. Martinez said that he hopes the new Congress will attack and come up with a new comprehensive immigration policy.

Martinez vows push on Lee water

Senator hears concerns on beaches, red tide, Lake Okeechobee

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U.S. Senator Mel Martinez, R-Orlando, said Tuesday he's aware of water pollution issues in Southwest Florida and he plans to make it a top priority in next year's session to get Lee County federal help.

Martinez met with local officials and business leaders at the historic Burroughs Home in downtown Fort Myers to hear concerns about the health of the Caloosahatchee River and local beaches.

"There is no question there is a problem, and it needs an answer," Martinez said. "I believe the answer lies in the Water Resource Development Act. It hasn't been funded since the year 2000. I am more frustrated about that than anything. I am committed to the effort."

The Water Resource Development Act includes several key Everglades Restoration projects expected to lessen the impacts of nutrient-laden water releases from Lake Okeechobee into local estuaries. For example, it includes funding for the Modified Water Flows project. This would essentially remove the washcloth from the drain at the south end of the system so that water can easily flow south.

About 80 percent of water released from Lake O goes east or west, said Ernie Barnett, director of the Office of Policy and Legislation for the South Florida Water Management District. About 80 years ago, all the lake's excess water flowed south.

Commissioner Ray Judah stressed to Martinez that water quality is extremely important to the area because it's the lifeblood of a \$2 billion tourism industry that employs more than 40,000 residents. Judah made suggestions, such as cutting federal subsidies to sugar cane farmers and buying sugar growers' land to use to store excess lake water. But those options aren't likely to be advocated by Martinez, who sees agriculture as part of the answer.

"This may not be a popular opinion, and Ray, you may not like this, but agriculture has a long history in Florida and I believe there is a balance we can achieve to benefit both sides," Martinez said.

Tom MacVicar is a water resource consultant for Gulf Citrus Growers Association. He referred to a government study that has been done on the idea of buying farmland for flooding, "and they haven't found a way to make it work."

"Every gallon of water that farmers use for irrigation is another gallon that doesn't go down the river," MacVicar said. "We ask that you not forget our contribution."

Commissioners have been pushing the water management district over the past few years to do something about the excess lake water releases blamed for causing algae problems and damaging marine life.

Barnett told Martinez "the commissioners have gotten our attention. We have serious water management problems in Southwest Florida."

Roxie Smith, with Lee's Tourist Development Council, has been involved in tourism for 50 years on Fort Myers Beach. She noted that outbreaks of red tide are more frequent now and have lasted longer in recent years than they used to.

"Years ago, we would have an occasional outbreak and it would be here about three or four days and then we wouldn't get another one for several years," she said. "With the tourists, you could always tell them, 'It will be over soon. Please come back and see us.' Now, we can't say that. Thank heavens for the senator. He truly cares and is trying to find a solution."

Martinez said there needs to be better science concerning red tide to determine why the outbreaks are more frequent so it can be targeted.