

Moore Haven Canal dredging may help restore Lake O access

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Peat-brown water in the Moore Haven Canal stretched for seven miles from the Alvin Ward Sr. Boat Ramp to Lake Okeechobee with not a human being in sight.

Plenty of alligators, wading birds, ducks, ospreys and vultures — but no people.

The problem was that Okeechobee water levels are very low — 12.61 feet on Thursday, 3.5 feet below average for this time of year. So water in the canal also is low — only a few inches deep — and navigable only by airboat and paddle craft.

"When the lake is this low, and it's going to get lower, you can't use that canal," Moore Haven Mayor Bret Whidden said. "Our access to the lake is gone. We're landlocked."

To make the lake accessible from Moore Haven in times of low water, Whidden and Glades County Commissioner Russell Echols have come up with a plan.

They would widen the canal by 20 feet and deepen it so water is 3-feet deep when lake levels are as low as 10 feet.

Dredging the canal, which runs through Okeechobee's Western Marsh, wouldn't hurt the environment, Echols said.

"That channel was dug in 1915, so it's not like we're ripping a place that's untouched," he said. "We're talking about a canal that's been there since the turn of the century."

Whidden and Echols also envision a hiking trail along the canal's eastern berm. Because the Moore Haven Canal, also known as 7-Mile Cut, has the closest Lake Okeechobee boat ramp to Lee County, it's a popular launch site for Lee County fishermen. Boaters also can reach the canal from the Caloosahatchee River.

Del Thorrington, of Fort Myers, who has fished Lake Okeechobee for 30 years, said dredging the canal is a good idea.

"I'm sure it'll help a lot," he said. "I've talked to some guys who've said it definitely needs to be dredged. In fact, I talked to a friend this seek who lives in Moore Haven, and he's quit guiding because the lake's so shallow that he has trouble putting in and out." Lake Okeechobee's water levels have been an issue for months.

Above-average rains during the 2004 and 2005 wet seasons raised the lake to more than 17.5 feet, and such high levels threatened the Herbert Hoover Dike.

Because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must manage the lake to prevent flooding in communities around it, massive amounts of water were released down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

This nutrient-laced fresh water caused a series of environmental problems in the estuaries, including algal blooms and fish kills.

So water managers decided to keep the lake at lower levels during the dry season to allow more storage during the wet season. But what's good for the estuaries is not necessarily good for fishermen.

"Here we are in Moore Haven, with a big, beautiful boat ramp and the lake, but you can't get there from here," said retired professional bass fisherman Willie Ridgeway, of Moore Haven. "Nobody's going to come out here and no bass tournaments are going to come here if you can't go out 7-Mile Cut."

HIKING TRAIL

In addition to dredging the canal, Whidden and Echols want to put the dredge spoil onto the canal's eastern berm to create a hiking trail and recreation area that would include restrooms and an observation tower.

"People who go to Gatorama for two or three hours and want to do something else the rest of the day can come to the hiking trail," Echols said. "From an eco-tourism standpoint in this area, it would be unparalleled. This type of marsh is unique. There's a lot to see."

Before Moore Haven and Glades County can start work on the canal, they'll need permits from the Army Corps and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

This is not the first time dredging the canal has been discussed, said John Iglehart, director of the DEP's South District.

The subject came up during the drought of 2001, when lake levels dropped below 9 feet, but the idea wasn't pursued because the drought ended and lake and canal levels rose.

During the 2001 discussions, the state determined that dredging the canal wouldn't damage bottom-dwelling organisms because there weren't many to damage.

"I haven't seen what they want to do," Iglehart said. "We didn't see any real issues with water quality or submerged resources when we looked at this in 2001."

"We'll probably be having discussions about it in Glades County, and we'll try to accommodate whatever they need."

GETTING APPROVAL

The next step for Whidden and Echols is to talk to the permitting agencies and try to win the endorsement of environmental groups.

Paul Gray, the National Audubon Society's Okeechobee science coordinator, heard about the plan for a hiking trail Thursday and said it sounded like a good idea.

"There's that huge lake out there, and people have trouble accessing it," Gray said. "Moore Haven is this little community with all these natural resources, but it's hard to utilize them because you can't get to them. People would kill to see all the birds and things they have out there, but they don't know about them."

A big issue for Echols and Whidden is building positive public opinion for their plan. "We don't want any battles," Echols said. "The first thing that usually happens is everybody gets into a battle before anything starts. We want people to know this will be beneficial for everybody, fishermen, bird-watchers, everybody."