

# Muck dredging would help St. Lucie River

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In an effort to limit navigation problems when the level of Lake Okeechobee drops, state officials have initiated a study into dredging the boating channel along the waterway from the St. Lucie Lock to Clewiston. The work won't just benefit boaters, however. By removing the muck from the deep channels, officials will be keeping that sediment from entering the St. Lucie River and settling on the river's sensitive sea grass beds.

We understand and fully expect there's a wonderful side benefit of environmental improvement," said David Roach, the executive director of the Florida Inland Navigational District, which has initiated the \$400,000 study to dredge 57 miles of channel. "People are out on their boats to enjoy the environmental qualities of the world. That's the wonderful thing for our constituents," he added.

Starting in the next few weeks, the navigational district will begin collecting data with underwater surveys and sediment analysis to determine the best way to remove and reuse the muck - as well as see if there's a way to stop it from entering the 80-foot-wide channels again.

The work will be in conjunction with a larger study already under way by South Florida Water Management District planners, who are looking at dredging "hot spots" in the northern sections of Lake Okeechobee where underwater plants cannot grow due to the thick muck and extended high lake levels.

Susan Gray, the water district's Lake Okeechobee division director, said the district will soon ask for companies to submit work plans to dredging even larger areas of the lake as well.

"The more sandy the material is, the easier it is to remove. In the lake, we're seeing liquid mud," she said. "One of the things about lowering the lake, you have to maintain navigational access."

So Roach is also looking for land to purchase for "dredged material management facilities," a place for the sediment pumped in with water to dry out before it is possibly mixed with soil for agriculture fields or residential yards if the nutrient levels can be reduced.

There are already 56 such facilities along Florida's east coast. Another is proposed on 23 acres in Martin County just north of Loblolly Bay.

But before the muck is dried out and used, officials need to understand where it is coming from. Officials know already that some of the sediment comes from canal bank erosion and from area farms, Roach said.

In the St. Lucie River, much of the sediment also comes in with water discharged from Lake Okeechobee. One of the worst shoals in the lake is right in front of the Port Mayaca lock, which empties into the St. Lucie Canal, he said.

"Capturing those sediments west of the St. Lucie Lock and removing them from the system is the most environmentally beneficial thing that can be done," Roach said. "The first step is to figure out the problem. Moving dirt is the second oldest profession. That's the easy part."

The latest on Lake O

. On Tuesday, Lake Okeechobee stood at 13.78 feet above sea level.

. Lake discharges into the estuaries have ended, but state officials have proposed to continue the releases into the Caloosahatchee River to maintain healthy salt levels there. A decision should be made later this week.