

New suggested plan better for island estuary

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Sanibel's efforts to get the Army Corps of Engineers to change its tentative new water management plan for Lake Okeechobee have resulted in a major step forward, according to Natural Resources Director Rob Loflin. Loflin said of all the proposed plans, the latest one does the best for the Caloosahatchee.

Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville Commander Col. Paul Grosskruger approved the latest contingent schedule largely in response to the grassroots campaign against its predecessor, led by the city of Sanibel. More than 2,000 postcards from the island area were directed to Army Corps leaders during the public comment period last fall.

The new tentatively selected plan, or TSP, best balances the multiple and sometimes competing needs of various stakeholders, Loflin said, including Lake Okeechobee and its dike, the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, and the Everglades. The plan is named 1B-T3 and, if adopted, will control Lake Okeechobee operations until 2010.

What makes this a better plan is that water flow measurements would be taken at a different location, Loflin said, something Sanibel has advocated for over a year. The new plan calls for water flow to be measured at the S-79 Franklin Lock at Alva instead of at the S-77 Moore Haven Lock at the edge of the lake. This should result in a significant reduction in the number of times excessive flows are discharged from Franklin Locks into the Caloosahatchee estuary.

Although we are not talking miracles here, as projections still call for unacceptable extreme releases to the Caloosahatchee under very wet conditions, the new TSP is a substantial improvement over the existing water release schedule for the lake, Loflin wrote. He is recommending the city support the new plan with the following additions:

(1) a requirement to keep discharges below biologists recommended maximum of 2,800 cfs unless the Herbert Hoover Dike is in danger and public health and safety are at risk; and

(2) that the Army Corps identify all public lands that can be used for emergency water storage AND require discharges be made to these lands PRIOR to any discharges to the

Caloosahatchee in excess of 2,800 cfs AND prior to any discharges to the St. Lucie in excess of 2,000 cfs (emphasis Loflin s).

People United to Restore our Rivers and Estuaries (PURRE) agrees the plan is an improvement but that more needs to be done.

As far as the new TSP, anything outside the optimum flows that the scientists say are best for the river and estuary are simply unacceptable, PURRE Executive Director Mary Rawl said.

Michael Valiquette, PURRE chairman, said measuring from Franklin Lock and also requiring a 2,800 cfs limit, while certainly desirable, would make it practically impossible for the Corps to release any water at the Moore Haven

Lock during the wet season when the Caloosahatchee basin watershed is feeding into the river. They would have to close up the Moore Haven lock and never release any water from it, or at least fill the river basin east of the Franklin Lock, which could cause flooding in the Labelle and Alva areas.

He predicted the Army Corps won't agree to adhere to both conditions. Until we can figure out a way to move the water south, they cannot commit to those numbers, Valiquette concluded.

Valiquette used this example to explain:

It's rainy season and storm water runoff from Kissimmee is filling Lake Okeechobee. If the new plan is adopted and the 2,800 cfs maximum is imposed, the Army Corps can't release more than that from the Franklin Lock into the Caloosahatchee which scientists agree would be a good thing for the estuary. But if the lake is filling up, they will release that 2,800 cfs maximum from Franklin Lock, which contains primarily Kissimmee basin watershed runoff, not Lake Okeechobee water. Then, having released as much water as allowable down the Caloosahatchee, it will be impossible for the Corps to release any water from Moore Haven to bring down the level of the lake.

It's not a question of whether measuring at Franklin Lock and keeping the releases to 2,800 cfs is better for the estuary; it's a question of whether the Army Corps will agree to do both, as the city of Sanibel is recommending.

Measuring at the Franklin Lock instead of at Moore Haven is important to be able to gauge the damage being done during heavy releases to our estuary, Barbara Cooley said. Cooley, a PURRE board member, said measuring the water at Franklin Lock brings the

west coast system more in line with the way it is done on the east coast where the St. Lucie River suffers from excessive releases. It makes it more equitable, she said. And this puts more pressure on them to find other places to put the water and other places to send it, like south.

Rawl said the question most people ask is why more water can't be sent to the south. When I answer that the water is too polluted to go to the Everglades or anywhere else, the next question is, Then why can they send the polluted water here? This is the major unanswered question.

PURRE wants the Army Corps to place more emphasis on water storage and the use of private land and other property to store, and treat, Lake Okeechobee water.

Loflin expects the public comment period on the new plan to begin in February or March and the Army Corps to accept a final plan in June.

Just from my own personal feeling, I think they will be less inclined this time to make any changes to the water release schedule, since they have extended their time period, but I don't know for sure, Loflin told city council last week. My thought is that they'll be taking comments but not necessarily incorporating many changes into the new release schedule from those comments.

Rawl said the process is at a critical decision point, as this will show the lower west coast whether all of our hard work has paid off. I hope we will not become complacent or get lulled into a false sense of security during the next few months. We need to keep up the pressure from every angle.

Valiquette said he vowed to Grosskruger to continue to work with the Corps of Engineers to find solutions to this massive problem as long as the Corps continues to make the necessary changes to the entire system's processes.

If the Corps reverts to a "business as usual" attitude the friendship will end, Valiquette warned.