

# **Our river's backers win one Excess Lake O water will be stored, sparing Caloosahatchee**

By Denise L. Scott, [dscott@news-press.com](mailto:dscott@news-press.com)  
Originally posted on January 12, 2007

People who have been fighting to protect the Caloosahatchee River's water quality won a significant battle Thursday morning.

Agencies that manage Lake Okeechobee agreed to designate land where excess water from the lake can be stored in an emergency instead of being released into the river.

The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board unanimously agreed to ask the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to include that storage capacity in a new Lake Okeechobee Water Control Plan.

A corps restoration manager, Dennis Duke, said the agency will include emergency storage in a proposed plan to be presented to the public in March.

"We'd like to build in an opportunity for offline storage," Duke said. "... I think this is a great example of a partnership."

Duke said most of the land is west and south of the lake, with a few parcels to the north.

All are owned by the state or the district or are under private ownership with agreements to temporarily and occasionally store water there.

"It's not like we're going to flood somebody's property," Duke said. "It needs the necessary infrastructure ~ small levees to control it and canals and pump stations to get it to the land. It's very controlled."

He said the largest properties each 15,000 to 20,000 acres are called the Roten Berger and Holey land tracts. They are off the Miami canal 20 miles south of the lake.

Larry Carter is the water district's assistant deputy executive director of operations and maintenance resources.

He said emergency storage isn't just about flooding property. He said it includes using existing and planned aquifer storage and recovery, reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas.

"It's a combination of all different areas," Duke said. "We're looking at all possibilities."

Sanibel Mayor Carla Brooks Johnston told the district board that a short-term solution is important to give the estuary at the mouth of the river a chance to heal.

She and others have complained that it's overloaded with nutrients and algae blooms caused by releases from Lake Okeechobee during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons.

"We can't have that happen again," Johnston said. "We need to be able to recover and have the waters clear themselves out. ... We're an island surrounded by the effects of releases. Our environment is our economy."

The state, county and municipalities have hurricane management plans, she said, and the water district should have a similar strategy to determine what to do with releases that exceed safe amounts.

"I'm pleased with the progress since I was here a year ago dialing 911," Johnston said. "We need proof and we need evidence and we need to see what exactly your plan is going to be."

Carter said the goal is to have 450,000 acre-feet of storage, which would take a foot of water off the top of the lake.

About 40,000 acre feet is available now, with 156,250 expected by July.

For now, he said, dry weather has kept the lake at a level low enough for significant storage.

Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah said providing more storage to handle maximum flows from the lake is the key to restoring the Everglades and the estuaries. So, he said, the resolution is a critical step in the right direction.

"The next step would be the recognition that this storage needs to be in the Everglades agricultural area south of Lake Okeechobee to restore historic flows and to provide for appropriate water-quality treatment of runoff that flows to the Everglades," Judah said.

Johnston said the decision of the district and corps to work together on this issue is a vast improvement from last year, when they simply pointed fingers at each other.

But, she said, more needs to be done to find additional water-storage areas.

"I think they've got internal momentum going," she said. "It's not solved yet, but at least people are working on it. The pressure will continue. We don't intend to stop until the job is done."

Ernie Barnett, the water district's director of policy and legislation, said the board shares her concerns.

"We're willing to be responsive, to listen to local communities and implement whatever steps we can take to protect the estuaries," he said. "We're pleased that the Army Corps