

# You can help save your river, estuaries

News-Press Editorial  
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## TO COMMENT

The comment period for the revised Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule ends Oct. 2, 2006.

Comments may be submitted to:  
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or by e-mail to [publicmail.cesaj-cc@saj02.usace.army.mil](mailto:publicmail.cesaj-cc@saj02.usace.army.mil).

Visit [saj.usace.army.mil/cco/lorss\\_desc.htm](http://saj.usace.army.mil/cco/lorss_desc.htm) for more information on the proposals.

Improved conditions in the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary should not obscure the likelihood of more damaging releases of polluted fresh water from Lake Okeechobee in the future.

With those releases we can expect more devastating effects on our environment and on a tourist industry and outdoor way of life that depend on clean, productive water.

A key battle in this war is over new U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposals for how to manage lake water. That plan aims to balance several competing interests, but in the great tradition of South Florida water management, coastal estuaries like ours get short shrift. There were public hearings on the plan in July, and a written comment period ends Oct. 2. In the meantime there will be another round of public hearings next month, including one in Fort Myers.

The comment period and the second round of hearings will give people here another important chance to demand changes in the proposed release schedule.

## BAD NEWS

The new schedule envisions keeping the lake at a lower level. Normally, this would be good news. People here and on the similarly beleaguered St. Lucie River and estuary on the east coast want a lower lake level so more water can be stored in the wet season. The goal is to avoid the heavy releases of lake water, polluted with nutrients from fertilizer and animal waste. Those releases blast away the balance of salt and fresh water crucial to the estuary's productivity, and the nutrients trigger explosions of algae that use up oxygen and choke out other marine life.

But the good news is more than outweighed by the proposal of a new maximum safe lake level of only 17.25 feet, which would require water to be released much sooner as the lake rises. Lee County officials and those at the South Florida Water Management District think a higher maximum is needed and will not endanger the dike around the lake.

As we said on this page last month, we need to sustain interest in a problem that's seasonal in character and can disappear for long stretches from the water and the headlines. But high water will return to Lake Okeechobee and with it the need to release some of it to safeguard the dike that protects lakeside communities.

## KEEP ACTIVE

There haven't been any significant releases since winter, when algae blooms triggered by releases from the lake signaled a dire threat to the estuary and triggered an angry backlash from business leaders, environmentalists and citizens in general.

That's when The News-Press Editorial Board started its STOP THE MUCK campaign, aimed at reducing pollution from both the lake and from other sources along the river and its coastal bays. Since then, citizens have turned out in force for meetings, school children have started educational campaigns and legislation has passed creating a new council to review lake water management from coast to coast.

There are several longer-range answers to this problem in the works, and more are needed. We also must remember that the lake isn't the only major source of this pollution. There are things happening on several fronts in this war.

But right now we need immediate help from better management of the lake. You can help by submitting comments and attending these meetings.