

Water leaders tout Lake O reservoir 'test cells'

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Southwest Florida's water managers are excited about two tests they've made on the best way to build a reservoir to hold excess water from Lake Okeechobee.

"Every site we approach for a reservoir has a different soil make-up," Agnes Ramsey, assistant director of the South Florida Water Management District's Acceler8 program, said Friday during a media event at the site of the tests.

Water district officials call them "test cells."

"We want to be sure of the best way to control seepage and other concerns such as erosion," Ramsey said.

One Lee County commissioner said Friday money for the cells and reservoir would have been better spent flooding agricultural fields south of Lake Okeechobee.

Next July, the water management district will begin construction on a \$338 million reservoir in Hendry County that will store water during extremely wet seasons. The idea is to reduce excess water flow into the Caloosahatchee estuary.

Before building the reservoir, the district built two test cells to evaluate materials and monitor seepage and water quality.

The reservoir is part of the Acceler8 program, eight projects for which the water district borrowed \$1.5 billion to speed up Everglades restoration.

During the past two years, the Caloosahatchee and its estuary have been devastated by huge amounts of nutrient-laden fresh water released from Lake Okeechobee.

Those releases caused massive micro- and macroalgal blooms, and the excess fresh water disrupted the salinity of the estuary.

When completed in 2010, the reservoir will hold up to 170,000 acre feet of water - that's 55 billion gallons of water, enough to fill 110 Olympic-size swimming pools.

"We're excited," said Rhonda Haag, interim director of the water district's Lower West Coast Service Center. "The reservoir won't solve all our problems, but when all the Acceler8 projects are completed, it will help. This is a good start."

Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah was not impressed with the test cells or plans for the reservoir.

"It's a drop in the bucket," Judah said. "We still need 1 million acre feet of storage. They could have taken that \$350 million and bought land in the Everglades Agricultural Area and create storage there."

Judah has been an advocate of flooding agricultural land during wet seasons so water isn't dumped down the Caloosahatchee when Lake Okeechobee water levels get high.

Another sticking point for Judah is the reservoir was not designed to filter water before it's released back into the river. Some reservoirs, called

stormwater treatment areas, are filled with wetlands plants that filter out nutrients and other pollutants.

"This reservoir will be an incubator for blue-green algae," Judah said. "It's going to get a nutrient soup of water; the water will be calm, and the temperature will be at a point where you'll have algae incubation."

Ramsey said a filtration component might be added to the reservoir at some point.