

Southern flow way proposed by Rivers Coalition

By Pete Gawda, Okeechobee News

A proposal to store water south of Okeechobee could cause a decrease in the unwanted discharges of excess lake water to the estuaries.

The discussion of a storage flow way to the south of the lake was a major topic of discussion at the Thursday, Nov. 30, meeting of the Nine County Coalition for Responsible Management of Lake Okeechobee, St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries and Lake Worth Lagoon.

The coalition is made up of commissioners representing Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin, Lee, Palm Beach, Hendry, Glades, Highland and Osceola counties.

"Take the water south," insisted Karl Wickstrom of the Rivers Coalition Defense Fund. "Everything else is nonsense."

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has been experimenting with aquifer storage and recovery (ASR) wells, a process whereby excess water is injected into wells below the potable water level and recovered if needed. There are many unknown factors with this system, including cost.

Mr. Wickstrom predicted that ASRs would not be effective. He presented what he called the Plan Six Concept to the coalition. This is a thick report advocating a storage flow way south of the lake to alleviate discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries. The Plan Six area would cover 230 square miles, much of which is already public land. The cost of acquiring the additional land is estimated at \$560 million. The River Coalition Defense Fund claims that figure is about one-third of the amount estimated for ASRs.

"The tragic degradation of the St. Lucie estuary is a sad testament to the inadequacy of present CERP (Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan) policy," George Cavros, a South Florida environmental attorney who assembled the report, stated in a press release. "Now, through CERP's adaptive management policy, an EAA (Everglades Agricultural Area) Plan Six-type flow way can and should become the focus of the Everglades restorations."

The press release stated that as far back as 1993 a southern flow way was advocated. However, the press release went to say that compromises were made to avoid restoring a flow way through the EAA with the alternative being ASR.

"Now, it's painfully obvious that CERP needs a major overhaul," said Mr. Wickstrom, who is coordinator of the defense fund.

The Rivers Coalition Defense Fund is the legal entity of the Rivers Coalition. The overall group is made up of about 43 conservation, business and professional organizations dedicated to restoring and protecting the estuary.

"Restoring the natural southward flow of the Everglades ecosystem is absolutely critical to restoring the Everglades and saving the St. Lucie estuary from ruin," stated the Plan Six Concept Report.

The report goes on to describe a flow way as, "a broad shallow marsh area that is used to freely flow water from Lake Okeechobee to one or more of the water conservation areas."

The proposed flow way would start 2 miles north of the Bolles Canal, would vary in width between 7 and 13 miles and would be 22.5 miles in length. The east levee of the Miami Canal and the west levee of the North New River Canal would serve as levees for the flow way.

"You cannot store your way out of a wet season," said Patrick Hays of Martin County. "Please create a flow way south."

Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah questioned the cost benefit of ASR wells. He stated that when a disproportionate amount of rain falls south of the lake, it is lost and cannot be stored. He suggested acquiring land to the south of the lake for storing and filtering water. He also supported a flow way to the south.

The coalition asked Mr. Wickstrom to come to the next meeting and make a more detailed presentation on Plan Six.

Tommy Strowd of SFWMD admitted to the coalition that ASR costs are unknown.

Mark Perry of the Everglades Coalition stated that a southern flow way would take water back into a system that naturally hydrates and rehydrates. He noted that the stormwater treatment areas (STAs) proposed by SFWMD to store excess water did not have enough capacity. He said a flow way might be more helpful and the estuaries would not be damaged. He was opposed to the ASR system.

An opposing view was expressed by Hendry County Commissioner Kevin McCarthy who noted that when water is stored south of the lake, no one to the north could use it

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