

Project may clean up Lake O

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Officials from counties surrounding Lake Okeechobee hope state legislators will pay for restoration projects on their wish list for a healthier lake and watershed.

This week, state water management district officials will begin to work with members of the Nine-County Coalition for Responsible Management of Lake Okeechobee to refine a new list of water quality projects designed to benefit the beleaguered waterway.

Even though county commissioners submitted projects for consideration last week at a meeting in Okeechobee, the list - which must include detailed benefits and cost estimates, as well as a commitment for a 50 percent match from the local commission - is far from complete.

"We have a very tall order to put together, but it's definitely doable," said Garrett Wallace, director of legislation and operations for the South Florida Water Management District. "We hope to show the regionality that comes into water quality that the Nine-County Coalition embraces."

The request, formally called a community-based issue request, is similar to the St. Lucie River Issue Team and the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative, two programs that prioritize water-quality projects for funding from the state legislature. The Lake Okeechobee version of the request, though, has proved difficult. The county representatives differ in determining which projects are most important. Securing matching money from individual counties for regional projects may be challenging.

Plus, many of the proposed projects - such as constructing a "flow-way" for water moving south of the lake through the Everglades Agricultural Area - are too large and expensive for such a request, Wallace said.

"The best projects we can put together are very solid and doable," Wallace said. "The EAA flow-way is very controversial, and that's not something I see us working toward in the first year."

But Coalition Chairman Ray Judah, a commissioner from Lee County, said he hoped politics doesn't cut into the idea of creating a regional restoration approach.

"We need to take a broad-based, regional approach and support the projects we could implement quickly," he said. "Clearly, it's a joint venture here."

After Wallace works with county staff to determine project specifications, the coalition plans to vote on a final list of priority projects on Nov. 30 in Okeechobee.

PROPOSED PROJECTS TO CLEAN UP LAKE OKEECHOBEE

.Building reservoirs north of the lake in the Kissimmee River valley.

.Dredging muck from the bottom of the lake.

.Cleaning stormwater coming out the C-43 Canal to the Caloosahatchee River.

.Building a "flow-way" south of Lake Okeechobee to move water toward the Everglades and away from local estuaries.