Pressure on state to protect Treasure Coast estuaries

By SUZANNE WENTLEY
suzanne.wentley@scripps.com
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STUART — After six months of debate, a group of elected officials and concerned citizens who live along the Okeechobee Waterway said Thursday they believe they've found a way to improve the health of the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers.

Created by former Gov. Jeb Bush, the Caloosahatchee/St. Lucie Corridor Advisory Committee met at the Indian River Community College's Wolf High Technology Center to make recommendations to the state Department of Environmental Protection and the state legislature.

Residents of Martin, Lee, Okeechobee, Palm Beach and Hendry counties who served on the committee are asking the state to adopt new laws and formally reevaluate the success of clean-up efforts at least every three years.

DiTerlizzi said the recommendations will be submitted to DEP secretary Michael Sole. He said he also will deliver a final copy to state Senate president Ken Pruitt to garner support for the measure.

"We have serious, serious issues with the devastation through water releases," DiTerlizzi said. "We need to add the same levels of protections to the estuaries that Lake Okeechobee has."

On Thursday, Caloosahatchee/St. Lucie Corridor Advisory Committee agreed the state should:

- Create a Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Estuary Protection Plan, similar to the law protecting Lake Okeechobee. The estuary plan would mandate more monitoring and pollution reduction.

- Work to reduce the amount of freshwater discharges into the estuary by constructing new water storage facilities. In 2005, more than a trillion gallons of freshwater was released to tide through the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, committee member and Martin County commissioner Michael DiTerlizzi said.

- Implement new rules to reduce pollution north of the lake and along the rivers to limit pollution before it reaches the waterways.

- Establish an estuary research program that will document changes to water quality.