

"When the oysters are dead and the fish are dying from lesions, and you can't swim in the river because it's a health hazard and there's no public outcry, what do you have to work with?"

Kevin Henderson

River on brink of crisis

Water quality is deteriorating rapidly in the St. Lucie Estuary

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

The oysters are dying. Fish in the St. Lucie Estuary have rotting fins and early signs of lesions.

The water under the Palm City and Evans Crary bridges — which health officials are warning residents to avoid — is as cloudy and dark as a thick cup of coffee.

Water quality in the river has bottomed out, and it's only a month into the rainy season.

"It's pretty bad," said Paul Gray, a scientist with Audubon of Florida. "And it's not going to get better. It's going to get worse."

State scientists and water managers have been forced to recognize something St. Lucie Estuary advocates have feared for years:

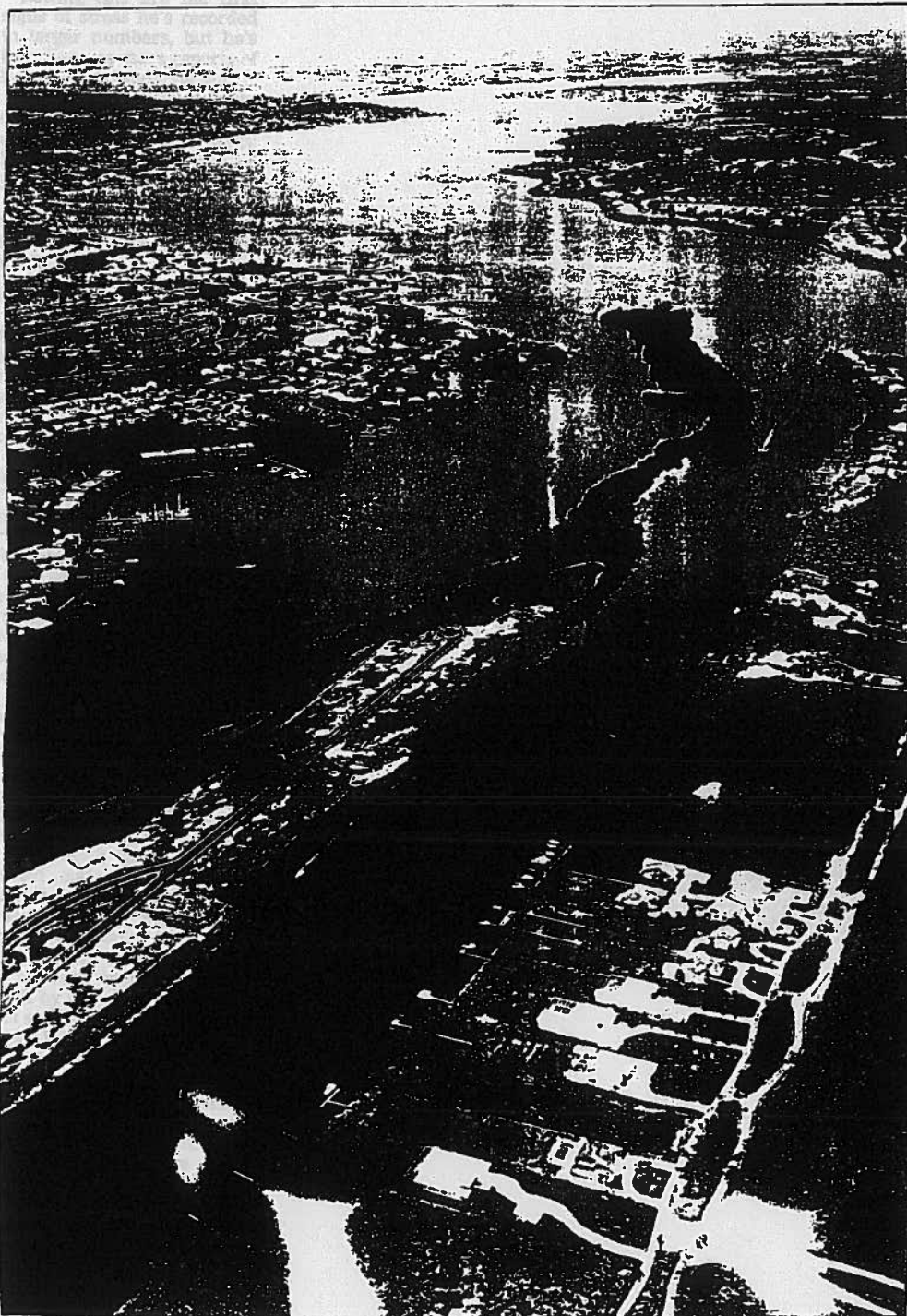
The river is on the brink of a crisis.

By next month, freshwater discharges from a high Lake Okeechobee likely will increase to constant, heavy releases that will help protect the Herbert Hoover dike — but continue to erode the health of the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon.

Recent heavy rains — predicted to continue throughout the summer — have added to the river's problems, which include a persistent presence of fecal coliform bacteria that has continued to puzzle health officials.

River advocates are beginning to compare the situation to 1998, when a massive fish lesion outbreak affected the local economy and spurred a public outcry that resulted in the development of a \$1.2 billion restoration plan.

But those reservoirs and wastewater treatment facilities won't



MATTHEW RATAJCZAK Staff photographer



An edition of
Treasure Coast
News/Press-360

The Stuart News

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Friday, August 5, 2005

50 cents

Algae in St. Lucie River may be toxic

Residents are warned to be cautious of the potential health dangers of the blue-green algae to humans.

By Suzanne Wentley,
staff writer

Martin County health officials warned residents to avoid areas of the St. Lucie River where blue-green algae

is visible after state officials on Thursday determined the algae species could turn toxic to fish and humans.

The same neon-green blooms — actually a bacteria

called microcystis — were identified in the Caloosahatchee River and in Lake Okeechobee, where the algae was confirmed to be toxic.

Samples taken from a dock near the Evans Crary Bridge last month were found not to be toxic, although scientists do not know exactly what turns the species toxic.

Bob Washam, Martin County's environmental health director, said contact with visible algae could cause skin rashes, irritated eyes and runny noses. Drinking water containing the algae can result in more serious health problems and is not advised.

"The more there is, the more visible, the higher the danger is," he said. "It's recommended to avoid contact with visible algae."

The organism has been seen at boat ramps and near the Roosevelt Bridge, in the Hell's Gate area near Port Salerno and Sewall's Point

Earlier this week, the blooms were seen near the Evans Crary Bridge in the Indian River Lagoon, said Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida

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ALGAE FROM AL

Oceanographic Society, who sent the test samples to the state laboratory in St. Petersburg last month.

Even when the algae is not toxic, it is potentially fatal to fish because it uses up the dissolved oxygen that fish normally breathe, said Jeremy Lake, a spokesman for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.

Microcystis blooms in fresh, nutrient-rich conditions, he said.

"There's not a lot known

about what can trigger it going toxic to non-toxic (and vice versa). When the organism is stressed, it can become toxic," Lake said. "That's the tricky part about it."

The algae bloom was first reported in June. Tides could push it into salt water, which would kill it, but the heavy release of freshwater from Lake Okeechobee have hindered that process, Perry said.

"It's a mess," he said.

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Post a comment on TCPalm.com.

Lake O troubles may go to court

Some Treasure Coast activists say a solid legal case could force policy changes over freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee.

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

Seventy years of protests and tens of thousands of petition signatures haven't stopped water managers from releasing polluted fresh water from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie Estuary.

Miles of bright-green blooming algae, lingering fecal coliform bacteria and mounting reports from scientists of sick fish and dead sea grass haven't stopped the discharges, either.

The only answer, say some Treasure Coast activists, is creating a solid legal case to force policy changes. But bringing such a lawsuit will be expensive, time-consuming and complex.

"To win these suits, you need millions of dollars and years and years of time. That's a hard battle to fight," said Larry Crary, a ~~senior~~ attorney who is on the board of directors of the ~~Okeechobee~~ St. Lucie River Initiative. "Most people don't have that, especially a grass-roots group. But we've got to try."

Drawing on the experience of 50 years of previous legal attempts, members of the Rivers Coalition are meeting weekly with local attorneys to develop a case and raise money.

This year, there are two differences that work in the activists' favor.

➤ New legal precedent has been established in other water management cases throughout the state.

➤ With more than 1.6 billion gallons of lake water flowing into the estuary each day — quickly degrading its health — the outrage from Treasure Coast citizens is at an all-time high.

"The community consensus is, 'Go after them,'" said coalition chairman Léon Abood. "We have to present an intelligent and specific plan. I hope it works."

Paying for the fight

Even though they have not chosen which agency to target in a lawsuit, river advocates plan to form a nonprofit organization that can accept public donations to pay for a nationally known environmental attorney to bring credibility to the case.

Abood said they hope to persuade the attorney to take the case on a contingency-fee basis — which would allow activists to pay for court costs and the lawyer would be paid by the state or federal agency if successful.

Money is the biggest obstacle.

That lesson was learned back in the 1960s, when a now-defunct local activist group called the River League sued what was then called the Flood Control District because the league believed the lake releases would destroy the estuary. Despite donations from Jupiter Island Club and other organizations, they ran out of money and eventually lost.

In 1998, the St. Lucie River Legal Defense Fund filed legal action against the state Department of Environmental Protection.

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COURT

FROM A1

alleging that fresh water itself is a pollutant to the brackish estuary and so the discharges violated the Clean Water Act.

The state settled in 2000 by promising to help pass a rule outlining a health salinity range for the estuary.

But that never happened — due in part to the complexities of balancing the ecosystem with emergency flood control measures, the activists said.

"The only way to get anywhere is to sue in federal court and get a verdict that will force changes," said Kevin Henderson, the executive director of the river initiative.

Finding a precedent

That's what the Miccosukee Indians did, last year bringing a case against the South Florida Water Management District to the U.S. Supreme Court. The case involved dumping polluted water through the S-9 structure in central Broward County.

The lawsuit was sent back to district courts, but local activists said there was precedent established that can be used locally.

"We're hoping this lawsuit is the same, in a lot of respects," said Kevin Stinnette, the director of the Indian Riverkeeper group who sued water managers over the lowering of a Central Florida lake last year.

In that case, regarding

Lake Tohopekaliga, state water managers negotiated with private landowners to store excess water that would have been sent to Lake Okeechobee, and the suit was dropped.

With the Miccosukee case, lawyers for the tribe and the Friends of the Everglades argued that the water management district had to have a permit for a flood control pump, and that permit must uphold the Clean Water Act.

That argument could work for the St. Lucie Spillway as well, Cray said.

Activists probably won't argue for an injunction — a ruling by a judge that would force water managers to immediately stop the discharges from the lake.

Water managers can simply argue that without the releases, the Lake Okeechobee dike would be in jeopardy. That argument was used in 2000, when Lee County sued the state after the district declared an emergency situation and flooded both the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers.

'A last resort'

It's unclear whether Martin County commissioners will join activists in a lawsuit.

In 2003, they initially did.

A letter of intent to sue was sent to a dozen different agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Interior and the South Florida Water Management District, alleging the dis-

charges violated a number of laws, including the Endangered Species Act.

But in December of that year — after a visit from top state water managers — the commissioners agreed to drop the lawsuit. They said they feared the legal action would stop Congress from approving the \$1.2 billion local Everglades restoration efforts, which still is under consideration in Washington.

Abood said the activists are aware of the political pressure involved in lawsuits, and they plan to have each member organization of the coalition ratify the legal plan before going forward.

"This is the last resort," he said. "We've been working with the agencies for years. It has to come to this."

But even if a lawsuit proves successful — and that could take years — political will would still be necessary to achieve long-term goals of saving the St. Lucie Estuary from polluted fresh water, Cray said.

"That can be done politically without a lawsuit if the politicians make it happen. But nobody seems to want to do that," he said. "The ultimate goal is to get the attention of the regulators and the politicians to change their policies to fix the problem."

"There's a little bit more leverage by filing a lawsuit," he added.

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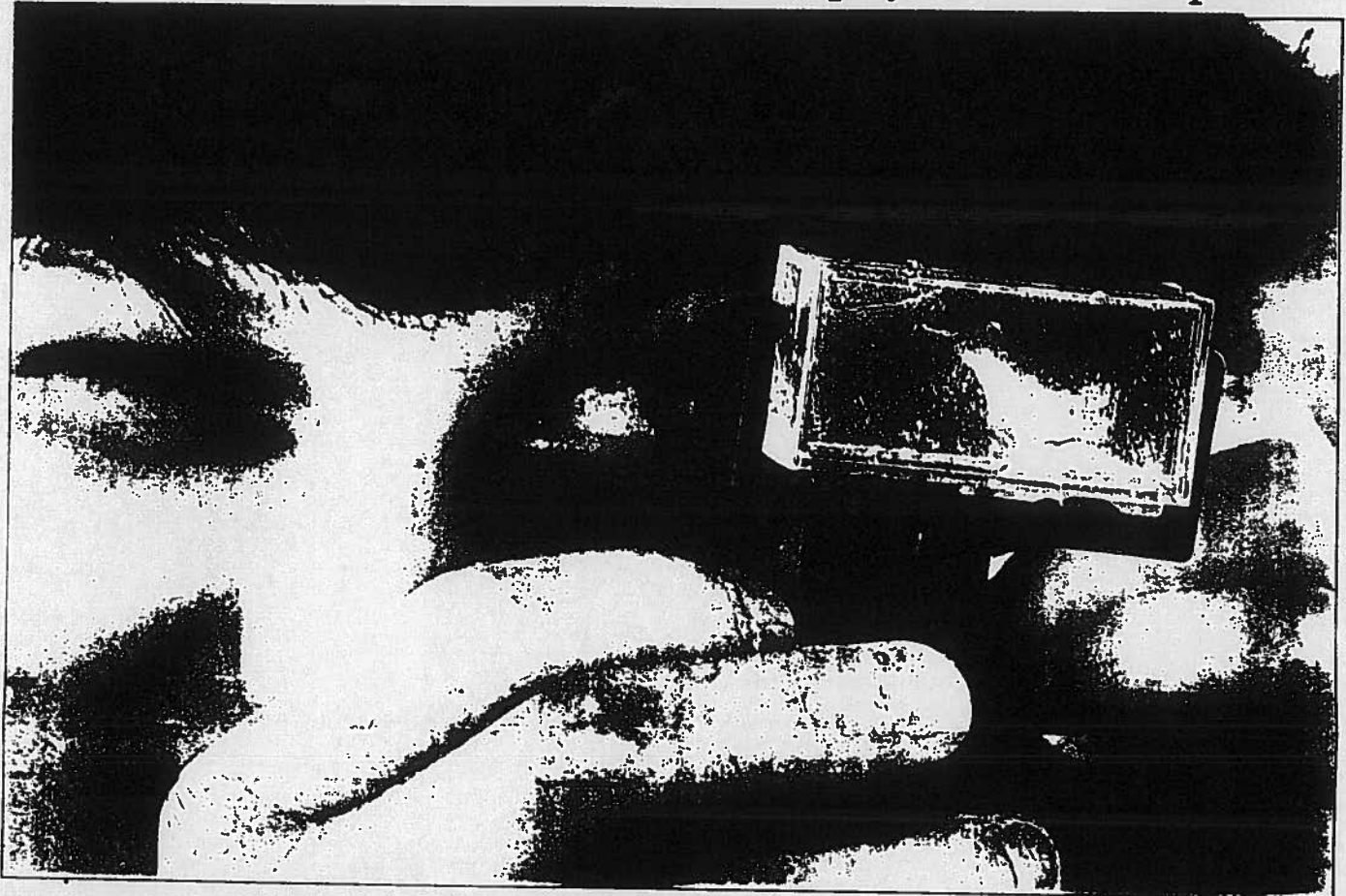
Sunday, August 21, 2005

"It's political inasmuch as people on the coastlines want to direct the blame to the central part of the state."

Rep. Mark Foley
represents most of the Treasure Coast

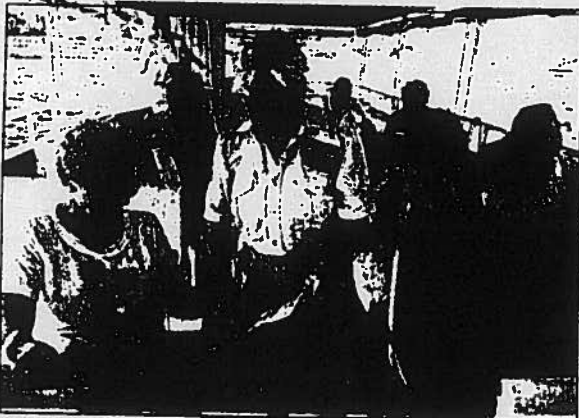
Diving into water politics

Lawmakers hear river advocates but can't play favorites with policies



photos by JASON NUTTLE staff photographer

David Toher, 14, looks for plankton amid the green algae that has been plaguing the St. Lucie River while he and his family are on a Sunshine Wildlife Tour on Friday. Capt. Nancy Beaver, of Sunshine Wildlife Tours, says her business is down more than 40 percent this summer because of the algae.



Beaver shows Janis Berman of Palm City their location on the river on a map of the local waterways.

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

Like the state's intricate system of canals and ditches, the politics behind water decisions are a complex web of competing interests — one in which the Treasure Coast struggles to be recognized.

With months of steady Lake Okeechobee discharges and degrading conditions in the St. Lucie Estuary, federal and state elected officials are keenly aware of the call by Treasure Coast residents to compel water managers to change their current policies in favor of the environment.

But rapid urban growth and powerful agricultural interests from throughout South Florida plague the

issue with political pitfalls — causing elected officials to often tread lighter than some residents would like.

River advocates demand a lower overall level of Lake Okeechobee, with more lake water being stored in the Everglades Agricultural Area. They also want water managers to store more water in the Kissimmee River valley, to add less water and pollution to the lake.

But state and federal politicians say it's a matter of not playing favorites with different parts of Florida.

"It's political inasmuch as people on the coastlines want to direct the blame to the central part of the state,"

POLITICS

FROM AL

said U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, who represents most of the Treasure Coast.

"You can't change the rules of the game because the people on the east don't like what people are doing on the west."

"That's not how politics work," he added.

Political maneuvering

Top on the political agenda for every Treasure Coast representative is the passage of the federal Water Resources and Development Act, which would authorize \$1.2 billion for local Everglades restoration projects.

The legislation is stalled in Congress, and U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson's trip to Stuart last week was designed in part to drum up support for the bill.

But during the boat ride on the St. Lucie River, Nelson also made time to tell Army Col. Robert Carpenter and a top state water management policy director his interest in restoring the Kissimmee River and lowering Lake Okeechobee.

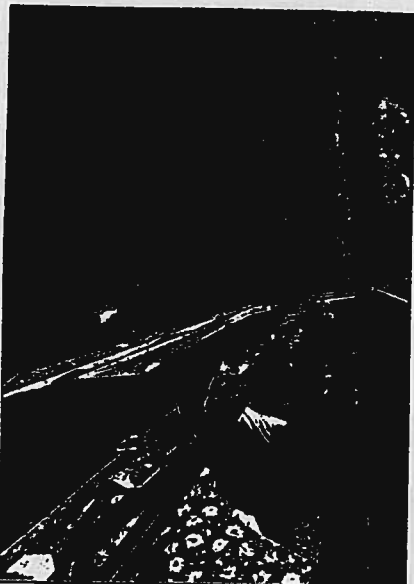
He also told them how a political maneuver might be the only way to force Senate majority leader Sen. Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, to schedule debate for the bill.

"He doesn't approve of everything we want. It may turn out to be that there's something that he wants that I can help him with," Nelson said. "I want to restore the Everglades."

But even under the best scenarios, it will take years to fund and build the reservoirs and water-cleansing facilities in the local plan. Until then, the estuary is hostage to decisions by the water management district and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Carpenter said his office is immune to politics.

"We do our operations based on science instead of politics," he said. "It's a strength of the system."



Mary Lou Purpura, far right, takes a look at a plankton net as it drags the waters of the St. Lucie River and fills with green algae while on the Sunshine Wildlife Tour on Friday.

Water supply bias

Still, Kevin Henderson, the executive director of the St. Lucie River Initiative, said his group has been petitioning for an overall lower lake level, because the members believe the lake is artificially high to buffer agricultural interests south of the lake from future droughts.

He's not sure the water management district's governing board — nine members appointed by the governor — are willing to change that water supply bias, he said.

Foley said he's written letters to the governing board asking for a lower overall lake level, but he said the appointed board doesn't have to consider his requests because it is not a federal entity.

"That's their excuse, that they need to balance the needs of water for the entire state," he said. "They don't have to listen to me. I obviously haven't been very successful. They continue to thwart the advice I give them."

State Sen. Ken Pruitt, the Port St. Lucie Republican in line to become the next Senate president, said Gov. Jeb Bush has shown his commitment to Everglades restoration.

"We shouldn't take away private property rights, but there needs to be shared adversity," he said.

Henderson said the governor must step in to limit the political influence of "Big Sugar" and other water supply interests.

"As agricultural interests are powerful enough to keep the place on top the heap, that's where they are," he said.

Political will

Still, with only 7 of the 21 miles of oxbows and natural curves restored in the Kissimmee River, slugs of polluted water from Kissimmee, Osceola and Orlando continue to flow into Lake Okeechobee. The runoff increases in volume and nutrients as the pace of development quickens there.

Keeping more water north of the lake demands stricter development regulations that would require the same volume of water remain on the private property after it is developed, activists said.

State Rep. Gayle Harrell, a Republican who represents parts of Martin and St. Lucie counties, said that issue was primarily one for the local commissioners.

"We can exert a lot of pressure, but those decisions are local decisions," she said. "We certainly don't want the like to burst. Things are happening, not as fast as I want them to happen. But our entire delegation is committed to keeping the pressure on."

Part of the motivation for the elected officials is the growing outrage from Treasure Coast citizens, who — along with water managers — agree that the St. Lucie Estuary and Lake Okeechobee have never had worse water quality.

A toxic blue-green algae bloom and persistently high

fecal coliform levels have closed the river from the lake to the St. Lucie Inlet, and murky water and low salinity levels have driven many saltwater species from the river. Oysters and sea grass beds are dead, and there has been an increase in fish kills.

But, Pruitt said, in the end, solving the river's problems will take an act of political will.

"When the government wants to make something happen, it gets done," he said. "When they don't, it's amazing how long it takes."

- Suzanne Wentley for the Post-Opinion on TCPalm.com

tion by fast-tracking eight projects — and he could use his influence for the St. Lucie River, too.

"He's made commitments to me, 'Just tell me what you want and need,'" Pruitt said. U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings and U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez were unavailable for comment. Len Lindahl, the Treasure Coast representative on the state governing board, also did not return a call for comment.

Lower lake level

Pruitt said he's been working with fellow state legislators to fund \$50 million pumps to be installed at the south end of the lake, so the level can be dropped significantly without concerns for water supply.

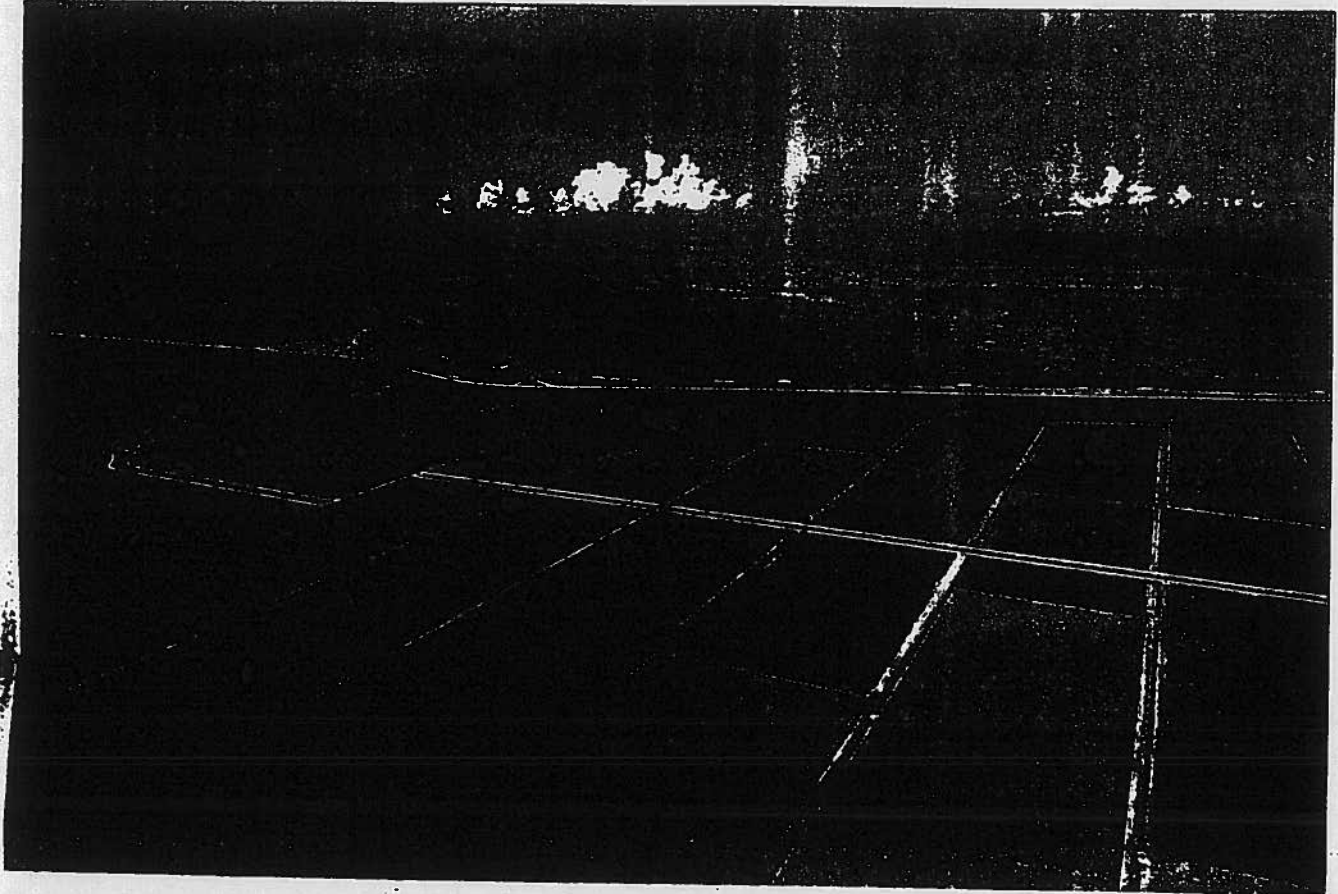
"The political pressure is on the Army Corps and the water management district to get the forward pumps installed," he said. "You don't give them any reason to keep the lake high. There's plenty of water for South Florida and agriculture."

But when it rains, the water has to go somewhere. State Rep. Joe Negron, a Stuart Republican, said the idea of storing water in the Everglades Agricultural Area should be given serious consideration.

"Some people are advocating to go ahead and flood the sugar fields, ruin their crops and let them suffer economic damage because they can't swim and fish. That's irresponsible."

Robert Coker
U.S. Sugar vice president

Advocates: Sugar sours river



DEBORAH SILVER staff photographer

More than 500,000 acres of fallow land and green sugar cane are divided into rectangular fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area, which borders rim canals and the natural marshland in the southern section of Lake Okeechobee. While farmers flood some fallow fields to control pests, the rest of the cane fields are dry — a fact that angers St. Lucie River activists who think the agricultural area should accept more water when the lake is high.

Water controls to benefit farming lead to toxic algae, coalition says

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

As Lake Okeechobee swells, it's business as usual in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

Within the patchwork of canals separating field after field of sugar cane south of the lake, workers on a recent day cut the green, fluffy crops with mechanical harvesters.

Puffs of smoke rose from the refineries dotting the 700,000-acre landscape, and every few miles a fallow field was flooded to kill pests. The excess water was drained from the black, or-

ganic soils that make the area so attractive to the large agribusinesses wooed there 60 years ago.

The farmers in the EAA benefit from consistently warm temperatures, nutrient-rich peat soils and — St. Lucie River activists say — perfect water control.

The estuary is plagued with toxic algae and poor visibility that have forced most wildlife to flee, and some Treasure Coast residents are placing the blame on sugar growers for farming where lake water historically flowed south into the soggy

marshland of the Everglades.

Without the FAA, estuary advocates say discharges from Lake Okeechobee out to the St. Lucie Canal — which for months have delivered massive amounts of polluted fresh water into the brackish estuary — would be unnecessary.

But for executives with U.S. Sugar, the largest cane grower in the nation, business as usual in the EAA isn't at the expense of the river — and, they say, it shouldn't be the other way around, either.

"Some people are advocating

to go ahead and flood the sugar fields, ruin their crops and let them suffer economic damage because they can't swim and fish," said vice president Robert Coker. "That's irresponsible."

Although there are many residents in Martin and St. Lucie counties who think the government should buy the EAA or force sugar growers to flood, St. Lucie River activists say it's more a question of what water managers call "shared adversity."

SUGAR

FROM AL

"No one asked the sugar growers in the EAA to make any 'sacrifice whatsoever,'" said Charles Grande, a member of the Rivers Coalition and president of the President's Council of Hutchinson Island. "Their actions demonstrate sugar has more influence than everyone else combined."

Activists contend water managers allow near-perfect drainage during wet times and almost guaranteed water for irrigation during dry times.

Coker said that wasn't the case. Currently, sugar growers have the limited ability to drain three-quarters of an inch of rain from their fields every day. When there was too little water during the drought of 2001, sugar growers had to negotiate with water managers to receive their rations early, he said.

"You can dry a plant up and you can also drown it. You've got to find the proper balance," Coker said. "The system they have today is one of shared adversity. Agriculture shares a large percentage of that — the way it should be."

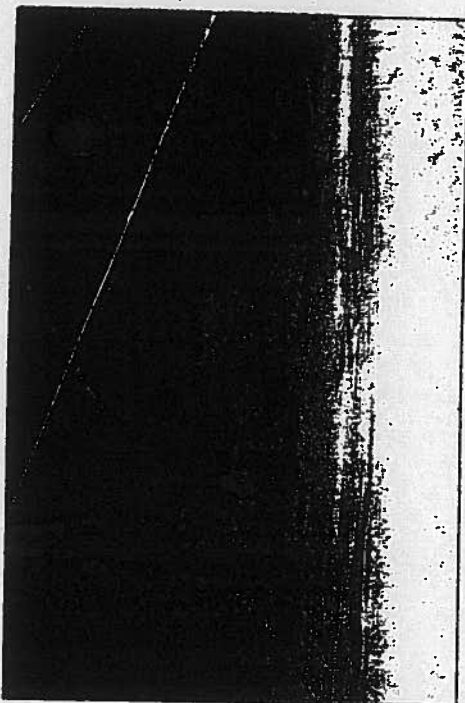
But Kevin Henderson, executive director of the St. Lucie River Initiative, said the rules that govern the management of Lake Okeechobee are based on the need to keep the water table of the EAA artificially low for the benefit of sugar cane.

"The EAA has essentially perfect drainage, perfect water supply," he said. "It's every which way is catered to."

Constitutional rights

Water managers deny sugar farmers receive special treatment.

"They are just another



DEBORAH SILVER
Staff of the paper

One flooded field stands out among thousands of dry sugar cane fields. Sugar farmers say their drainage systems can only move a limited amount of rain during wet times, but St. Lucie River activists contend water managers help farmers maintain favorable water levels while the estuary suffers.

"We have a plumbing system that is not designed to handle extremely wet conditions," he said. "We are investing major resources to fix these problems."

EAA's future unknown

But farming where historically the sawgrass sat in a foot of water exacerbates the

problem, said Paul Gray, a biologist with Audubon of Florida.

Last year, Audubon scientists asked state officials to consider another use for the EAA if diminishing soils or international trade makes sugar less profitable.

"The future is, we're defini-

tely not going to have sugar at farms there," Gray said. "We need to change the land use so that it's better for everyone."

He recommended a mix of "sustainable agriculture" like vegetables and clusters of development near Belle Glade, Pahokee, South Bay and Clewiston — while using the rest of the 700,000 acres for water storage and cleaning.

Coker said he didn't see an end to Big Sugar in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

Along with investing in a new refinery in 1998, U.S. Sugar officials have also worked to improve the quality of the water that drains from their fields. Water managers recently praised their efforts to remove phosphorus, calling sugar runoff some of the cleanest water in the state.

The sugar industry also provides more than \$3 billion and 25,000 jobs to the state's economy, executives said.

"I'm almost 50 years old, and in my lifetime and hope-

fully my children's lifetime, we will continue farming in the EAA and be good stewards of the land," Coker said.

To appease sugar farmers worried about water supply, water managers are even considering spending \$50 million on new pumps that would allow them to keep Lake Okeechobee lower while ensuring irrigation.

Barnett said a decision on the pumps has yet to be made, but the water management district's governing board is committed to solving Florida's water problem to the benefit of both the estuary and the EAA.

"That entire area was promoted, developed and encouraged by government in the '30s, '40s and '50s. They wanted agriculture in Florida ... and they drained the Everglades," he said. "Government priorities and politics have changed. We're more sophisticated now."

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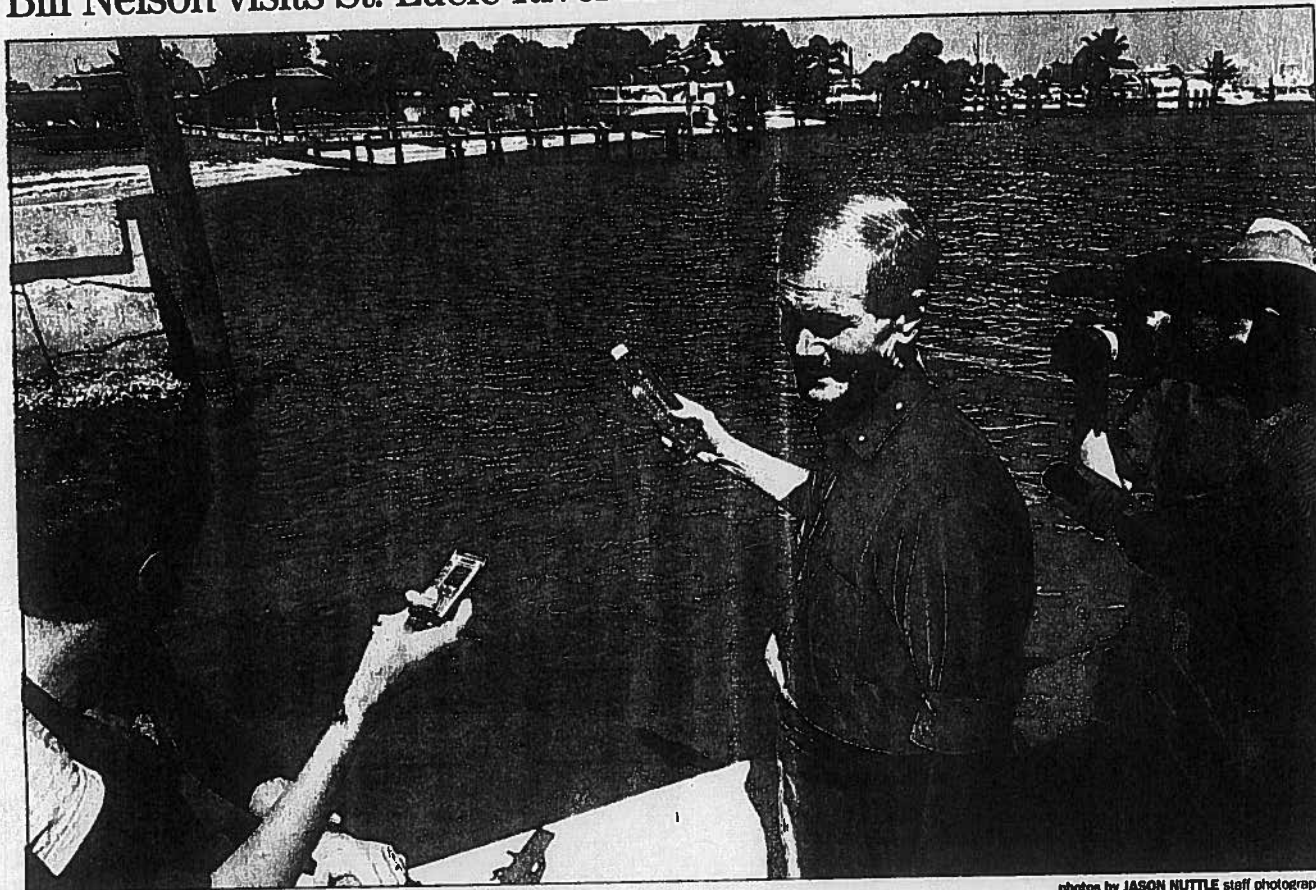
No private property is being intentionally flooded anywhere in the state, because there are constitutional protections that make that practice illegal, Barnett added.

But river activists said water manager keep the lake too high to ensure water supply for sugar — a practice that makes discharges to the estuary more frequent during rainy times.

Barnett said the lake is also a backup source of drinking water for utilities in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties, so water supply must be guaranteed for them as well.

Senator takes look at algae

Bill Nelson visits St. Lucie River for firsthand view of water problem



photos by JASON NUTTLE staff photographer

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson gathers a sample of algae-green water Wednesday during a tour of the river and to see the water conditions of the St. Lucie River and its estuaries. Nelson used the visit to get ammunition in his fight to persuade Senate colleagues to pass the Water Resources and Development Act.

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

The Water Resources and Development Act

- Funds and authorizes projects by the Army Corps of Engineers.
- Historically passed every two years but not since 2000.
- Contains authorization of the \$1.2 billion local Everglades plan, which includes reservoirs and stormwater treatment facilities to hold and clean local runoff in Martin and St. Lucie counties.

ON TCPALM.COM

Hear audio of Sen. Bill Nelson.



Jensen Beach resident Jackie Trancynger greets Nelson with a sign of support for his efforts to save the St. Lucie River.

STUART — Leaning over the edge of a boat floating in the St. Lucie River, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson filled a plastic bottle with water sparkling with neon-green algae.

"Look at that — green water," he said, holding the bottle up to the sun. "That's not what Mother Nature intended. I bet you won't find any fish down there."

And the large sections of algae blooming in the root-beer-colored river weren't the only thing that drew the attention of the senator, who visited the area Wednesday to gain more knowledge about the estuary's poor water quality caused by months of discharges from Lake Okeechobee.

"Notice you don't see any pelicans here," Nelson said, surrounded by Treasure Coast politicians and scientists from the Florida Oceanographic Society and Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution.

"The Indian River in front of my house in Melbourne, there are pelicans diving all over the place. You can see the bottom from about 6 feet of depth. You can't do that here."

The trip — squeezed in before two town hall meetings planned for Port St. Lucie and Vero Beach today — also was designed to give Nelson ammunition to

See NELSON, A5

Extensive monitoring to keep track of the algae bloom

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

With high levels of toxicity found in the algae blanketing the St. Lucie Estuary, state water managers on Wednesday announced plans to start a comprehensive

monitoring initiative to track the bloom's toxic levels.

South Florida Water Management District officials said the six-month program will include sampling of 41 locations throughout the district — including six in the St. Lucie River

— every other week.

Dean Powell, the director of the district's watershed management division, said the \$300,000 program will help standardize the samples to create a more accurate picture of the unsafe conditions in the estuary and in

other waterways.

On Tuesday, Martin County health officials warned residents to avoid the entire river — from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie Inlet — after the state tests

See ALGAE, A5

b

ALGAE

FROM A1

were made public.

"I wouldn't advise anyone to swim in the water where they see algae," Powell said. "You can kill it, but the cure is often worse than the disease. The best thing we can do is put out the appropriate warnings and precautions."

Results from tests administered by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute showed 373 micrograms per liter at the Roosevelt Bridge and 164 micrograms per liter in the C-51 canal in Palm Beach County. Other tests in Stuart showed 239 and 108 micrograms, but the exact locations of the test sites were unknown.

Powell said there were no state or federal standards for toxicity in algae. Although the recommended maximum for drinking water is 1 microgram per liter.

No fish kills have been reported, but they are expected once the algae starts to die, he added.

The tests in the St. Lucie Estuary — which start Monday — will include sites up-

stream of the St. Lucie Locks, in the middle fork, at the confluence of the forks, in the South Fork and one at the inlet.

There also will be tests in the Caloosahatchee River, the Kissimmee River chain of lakes, the Kissimmee River itself, Lake Okeechobee, Lake Istokpoga and in canals in Palm Beach County.

Meanwhile, Powell said, the Army Corps of Engineers and water management district officials agreed to change the way the nutrient-rich freshwater discharges will flow from Lake Okeechobee into the estuary.

Instead of a steady stream of 2,500 cubic feet — or 18,701 gallons — a second, the flows will vary in volume daily to let out the same amount of water but with less "collateral damage," he said.

"We're not sure that with those volumes you'll see much effect," he said. "We're pretty sure it won't hurt and maybe it will help. It more mimics a natural storm."

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NELSON

FROM A1

motivate fellow senators to pass the Water Resources and Development Act, which includes the authorization of \$1.2 billion in local Everglades restoration efforts.

Nelson said he's planning to bring the bottle of algae-ridden water to the office of U.S. Sen. Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader and Tennessee Republican who has yet to schedule the water act for debate.

He said the bill was stalled with fights over a Mississippi River project.

Nelson also pushed for the restoration of the Kissimmee River, which Army Corps officials said is a third complete, and the funding of the entire \$8.4 billion Everglades plan.

Jensen Beach resident Jackie Trancynger, holding a neon-orange sign criticizing Gov. Jeb Bush's lack of attention to the river's plight, greeted the senator when he arrived at Stuart's Southpoint Anchorage.

So did Ed Stout, the owner of South River Outfitters, a kayak business on the river's South Fork.

"There are people out there that this is directly affecting their livelihood. I'm one of them," he said. "When the river is in this condition, we can't let people in the water."

As the boat tour ended, Nelson accepted a moist towlette to clean the algae from his hands.

Everglades restoration — although it's taking longer than expected to authorize the local plan — is a good first step to improving conditions in the St. Lucie Estuary, he said.

"This is a start. Restoring the Everglades is essential not just for Florida but also for Planet Earth," he said. "This is one of these delicate ecosystems like the Amazon River that has an enormous impact on the rest of the environment."

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Lake Okeechobee failing

As bass spawning begins, decisions must be made to save the big lake

The St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries are in dire condition, but so is Lake Okeechobee, which is the source of the discharges.

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

LAKE OKEECHOBEE — With five well-worn rods and reels sitting unused on his boat's bow, Okeechobee resident Carroll Head cut the motor.

Slowly, he drifted through a pass between King's Bar and the lake's northwestern shoreline, a marsh once teeming with bass hiding in thick bullrush reeds.

Now, there are just a few stalks emerging from the muddy, algae-

LOWERING LAKE
Drastic measures may need to be taken to save Lake Okeechobee. **PAGE A11**

laced water.
"This used to be a beautiful place to fish," said Head, who has angled for bass on the lake since 1961. "You can't blame people for being enraged."

The high water levels in Lake Okeechobee — which have brought months of massive discharges into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries — did more than destroy the health of the brackish rivers with slugs of fresh water, toxic algae blooms and muck-covered oyster beds.

Lake Okeechobee is suffering,

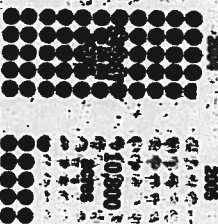
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A lake in decline

Water managers and long-time anglers agree: Lake Okeechobee has never been so unhealthy. The troubled lake ecosystem also isn't good for the St. Lucie Estuary, which has been battered as the outlet for excess lake water. Here is a look at recent research documenting the lake's deteriorating conditions:

Fewer plants

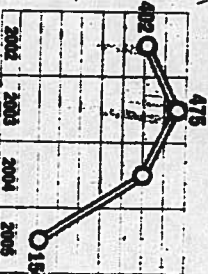
● 1,000 acres submerged plants



Submerged plants such as string grass and pond weed serve as fish habitat and help soak up excess nutrients in the water. Since hurricanes Frances and Jeanne whipped up the slimy muck in the center of the lake, more and more plants have died.

Fish population in decline

Largemouth bass caught by researchers each year:



Using electric shock catching methods, researchers caught the fewest largemouth bass in Lake Okeechobee in five years. Last year, more than 60 percent of the catch were juveniles. This year, there was only one juvenile bass caught — a forewarning of a smaller future population.

Nutrients skyrocket

Phosphorous levels (parts per billion) Target level: 100



Consistently high nutrient levels encourage massive blue-green algae blooms and the growth of invasive plants like water hyacinths and cattails. Scientists say suspended muck is to blame for the unprecedented numbers.

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with an 80 percent reduction in submerged plants in a year, pervasive algae blooms and murky waters that have pushed phosphorous levels to twice the normal, already-unhealthy numbers.

With bass spawning season under way, top officials with the South Florida Water Management District say major decisions for the health of the lake need to be made in the next few months to ensure it doesn't become a fabled disaster like Central Florida's Lake Apopka.

"The blooms are bad. The turbidity is bad. We don't have good vegetation and we're getting reports of poor fisheries coming in," said Susan Gray, the director of the district's Lake Okeechobee division. "All the acres and acres of vegetation and the diversity we gained from the (2000) drought is lost."

"Failure is not an option. You can't fix a totally failed system," she added. "We have to do this."

Without a drastic restoration effort, St. Lucie River activists say the extremely poor condition of the lake certainly will have a dire impact on the downstream estuaries.

"We've never seen it like this," Head said. "The hurricanes didn't cause the problem on Lake Okeechobee. The hurricanes showed us how bad the problem was on Lake Okeechobee."

And the lake's recent poor health made it clear that what's good for the lake is also good for the downstream rivers, he said.

"Nobody wants our dirty water, and I don't blame them," he said. "The status quo is killing our lake."

Lake Okeechobee restoration has to rely on water level

By Suzanne Wentley

To save Lake Okeechobee, drastic measures need to be taken, and water managers know it.

Last month, members of the South Florida Water Management District formally asked federal officials to lower the lake level to 12 feet and keep it there for 12 weeks. That would allow sunlight to reach the plant seeds that are now too deep in the water to germinate.

But based on data collected from the last time the lake was that low — during the 2000 drought — it will take much longer than that to start the much-needed restoration of Lake Okeechobee.

"We're still skeptical whether keeping the lake at 12 feet for 12 weeks only will be enough," said Steve Gorka, a biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "It can take six or seven months of low water until the vegetation will make a rebound."

Plus, water managers aren't even sure they'll be able to accomplish the original drawdown plan, because Lake Okeechobee needs to stand at 15 feet by Nov. 1 for the plan to work this year, said Susan Gray, the director of the district's Lake Okeechobee division.

Water supply

Last week, the lake was nearly a half foot above that goal — and more rainy weather was predicted.

"It's going to be a tough debate," Gray said. "There are a whole lot of hoops we have to jump through."

One of those obstacles is the fear from farmers around the lake that the drawdown would jeopardize water supply. Water managers already have begun to design temporary pumps to alleviate that concern.

Fish and wildlife biologists, meanwhile, said they were hoping the lake would get even lower than 12 feet so they can accomplish more than \$3 million of much removal work.

Paul Gray, a biologist with Audubon of Florida who focuses on lake issues, said a

lower lake could help the St. Lucie Estuary start a long recovery period.

Drawing down the lake to 12 feet this winter would cause even more polluted water to enter the estuary, but it would be even worse if wa-

ter managers are forced to wait a year. Then, the river might begin the slow healing process only to be thwarted by another inundation next year, he said.

"I appreciate what they've done, but they aren't doing

enough to fix it," he said. "Unless we can get more storage in the watershed and keep it from Lake O, the estuaries will be in a precarious situation, too."

District officials also pointed to plans for new reser-

voirs and stormwater cleaning areas to be built north of the lake. But like the \$1.2 billion Everglades restoration plans in Martin and St. Lucie counties, it will be years before those storage facilities are operational.

"People don't understand how monumentally large these problems are and how long we've ignored them," Gray of Audubon said.

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Water managers threaten Martin

The Water Management District said if Martin County does sue, it will take the St. Lucie Canal reservoir off a list of area projects among other things.

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

Alluding to Martin County commission legal discussions as "infantile," state water managers played hardball Wednesday, threatening to pull the St. Lucie Canal reservoir off a list of fast-tracked projects if commissioners sued over the poor health of the St. Lucie Estuary.

Top officials with the South Florida Water Management District also demanded the removal of a river activist from a district advisory board because of comments he made to county commissioners earlier this week.

The tough talk during the district governing board's monthly meeting in West Palm Beach came in response to months of vocal outrage from county commissioners, activists and residents upset with deteriorating conditions in the river and unresponsive to district's pleas for patience.

After governing board member and Treasure Coast representative Len Lindahl told fellow board members that Martin County commissioners viewed his recent visit as "threatening and belligerent," other governing board members took offense.

Governing board member Mike Collins said a county lawsuit could jeopardize funding for a plan to fast-track water quality projects throughout South Florida. He said he would offer a resolution to drop the St. Lucie Canal reservoir and stormwater treatment area — a \$300 million project to be completed by 2009 — from the list.

In Martin County, meanwhile, Administrative Services Director Taryn Kryzda asked county commissioners Wednesday to hold off allocating money in the county budget for a lawsuit over the lake releases until the Rivers Coalition establishes a nonprofit organization to fund a lawsuit it's threatening.

The county could appropriate money from reserves and make a grant to the nonprofit group that is expected to sue the Army

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Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District.

Board member Nicolás Gutiérrez took issue with that stance, which commissioners agreed to Tuesday.

"I don't want to use the word 'infantile,' but to say, 'we won't sue but we will fund private groups who will sue,'" he said. "They're just squandering their very positive legacy. We have to stick to our guns."

Also during the water district meeting, Collins dismissed a letter sent by Martin County Commission Chairman Lee Weberman asking that the governing board vote on a resolution — on an early version of the agenda — that would request the Army Corps of Engineers keep Lake Okeechobee at a lower level permanently.

The draft resolution said the lake management rules,

called WSE, were inadequate for protecting the health of Lake Okeechobee and the estuaries.

"Martin County is making demands that something is done, something I don't have any interest in complying with," Collins said.

Instead, Collins said the resolution would be brought back for discussion to an advisory committee — one which, he and other board members hoped, St. Lucie River Initiative executive director Kevin Henderson would no longer be on.

"He reported to the Martin County commission yesterday that the resolution regarding modifying WSE was killed by sugar," Lindahl said. "With all the difficulties I have in Martin County, that made it that much more difficult."

The board agreed to send a letter to Initiative President Bud Jordan, urging Henderson's removal from the advisory board.

Jordan said Wednesday he would do no such thing.

"We're not going to send a namby-pamby down there," he said. "They don't want anyone with engineering capability to challenge them. But someone needs to. Otherwise, there will never be a change to this river."

Martin County commissioner Sarah Heard said the governing board members should take responsibility for the toxic algae, diminishing wildlife and murky conditions in the St. Lucie River that has begun to have a negative impact to the area's economy.

"We've been fighting this battle for over 50 years, not unsuccessfully," she said. "We relied on them to protect our resources, and they forced us into a very difficult response."

"It sounds like they're trying to bully us," she added. "That's just dishonorable."

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The Stuart News

SERVING MARTIN COUNTY AND THE TREASURE COAST

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

Does this water look familiar?

Florida's west coast also suffering the ill effects of Lake O discharges

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

The St. Lucie Estuary isn't the only waterway with dying sea grass, dwindling fish populations and sights of bubbling blue-green algae.

Residents living along the Caloosahatchee River on Florida's Gulf Coast also have watched their livelihoods, weekend recreation and thriving ecosystem drain away with the waters of Lake Okeechobee.

Although Treasure Coast outrage has decreased somewhat as the algae blooms and dangerous bacteria plaguing the river have disappeared, the fury in Lee County is boiling over.

The recent influx of seasonal Gulf Coast residents — angry at what the constant polluted, freshwater discharges from the lake have done to water quality — has led to elected officials buying large, color ads to protest water management decisions, meetings attended by hundreds of citizens and even talk of legal action.

The unrest has caught the attention of governing board members of the South Florida Water Management District, who last week rebuffed demands of Lee County commissioners to flood agricultural fields south of the lake.

St. Lucie River activists also are taking notice.

"We can't get our problems solved unless their

See WATER, A11

STOP DESTROYING OUR WATER QUALITY NOW!

—AN OPEN LETTER TO THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT
DISTRICT FROM THE SANIBEL CITY COUNCIL



Dear South Florida Water Management District Governing Board:

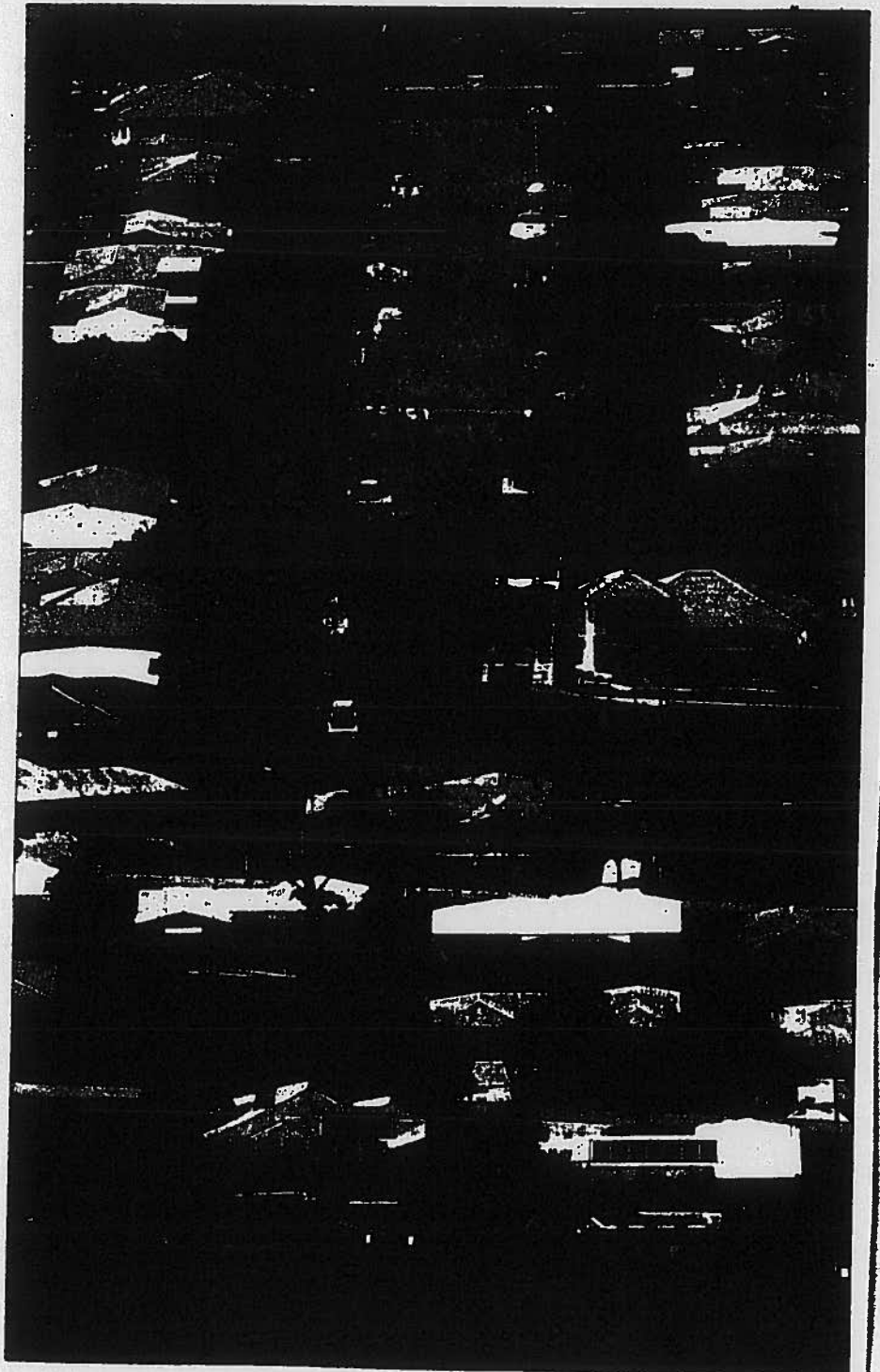
As the discharge continues of the waters of Lake O, we are alarmed and deeply upset to the extent that we believe the discharge into the Caloosahatchee River is destroying the life support system of the river. We are currently asking you to stop the discharge of the water from the lake into the river.

Your action is a direct result of the fact that the South Florida Water Management District is not taking any action to stop the discharge of the water from the lake into the river.

The Sanibel City Council's campaign to stop freshwater releases into the Caloosahatchee River includes this full-page advertisement, which appeared recently in the Fort Myers News-Press.

Coming up this week:

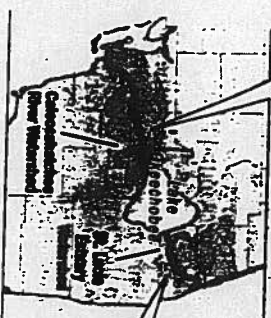
- Army Corps of Engineers public workshop on new rules for managing Lake Okeechobee: 7 p.m., Wednesday, Blake Library, 2351 S.E. Monterey Road, Stuart.
- Rivers Coalition will announce Friday whether it will file a lawsuit against state and federal water managers over the poor health of the St. Lucie Estuary.



ERIK KELLAR Naples Daily News

In a scene familiar to Treasure Coast residents, an algae bloom apparently fueled by polluted water released from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee River fills canals in Cape Coral in Lee County. Tired of the constant discharges, which are about double those released into the St. Lucie Canal, Gulf Coast residents and officials are pressuring water managers to halt the releases, as Treasure Coast groups are doing.

Caloosahatchee River
 About 8,150 cubic feet of water per second — equal to 8.26 billion gallons a day — flowed Monday out the Caloosahatchee River, measured at the W.R. Franklin Lock and Dam. About 80 percent of the water is from the lake, the rest from local runoff.



St. Lucie Waterway
 About 3,500 cubic feet of water per second — equal to 2.26 billion gallons a day — flowed Monday over the St. Lucie Lock and Dam into the St. Lucie River. Eighty-two percent of the water is from the lake, the rest from local runoff.

ROBERT LAKE staff artist

WATER

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problems are getting solved too," said Kevin Henderson, the executive director of the St. Lucie River Initiative. "It's not a matter of keeping the attention focused on us. It's keeping it focused on the problem, and the West Coast does that."

The 'buzz' issue

Due to its geography, it takes a little longer for the 37-mile-long Caloosahatchee River — which connects to Lake Okechobee by a canal at Moore Haven — to feel the impact of lake discharges, water managers say.

The western river is wider than the St. Lucie River, and — unlike the local waterway that has to wind around Sewall's Point before emptying into the ocean — the Caloosahatchee runs straight into the Gulf of Mexico and even suffers from saltwater intrusion during dry times.

But after months of discharges — which are usually at least twice as heavy to the west than out the St. Lucie Locks — Gulf Coast residents say the latest slugs of murky, nutrient-rich lake water are pushing the river toward an ecological crisis.

"It's literally the buzz issue in Lee County," said Mary Rawl, a Fort Myers resident and president of the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association, also known

"For us to say, 'Stop sending the water this way' is not feasible. We know where it would go — to the East Coast."

Mary Rawl
 president of the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association

as RiverWatch. "You can't go anywhere without people talking about the condition of the river. Our economy and lifestyle is based on the water."

Rawl said the toxic blue-green algae, which forced health officials to close the St. Lucie River all summer, is still present on the West Coast. All the saltwater fish are gone, and the fishing guides and other marine-based industries there are struggling, she said.

Gulf Coast activists have been watching the protests on the Treasure Coast this summer, and they want to work together, she said.

"For us to say, 'Stop sending the water this way' is not feasible. We know where it would go — to the East Coast," she said. "That's why we have to work together."

Week of protests

Last week, the city council in Sanibel — a small island at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River — ran an ad-



ERIC NEUMAN Naples Daily News

A pleasure boat speeds from the light waters of the Gulf of Mexico into a plume of pollution caused by water released from Lake Okechobee into the Caloosahatchee River.

vertisement in the local newspaper demanding state and federal water managers "Stop destroying our water quality now!" Another similar ad ran Sunday.

"It appears the focus was on a long-term solution," said Sanibel city manager Judge Zimnora.

"We're trying to be certain the water management district board members are aware of the very real short-term crisis. We believe they will not be responsive unless the elected officials show what a poor job the district has been doing to date." Earlier this year, Sanibel

reflected lake water into the sugar fields of the Everglades Agricultural Area when there is a state of emergency harming public health and aquatic life.

Flooding fields south of the lake is the same request suggested by Martin and St. Lucie county commissioners, as well as St. Lucie River advocates. But as on the west, the East Coast activists haven't had much success, Judah said.

"They're running against a strong tide of political cron-ism between U.S. Sugar and those politicians that are propping up and supporting their position," he said. "We share your outrage, believe me."

"We certainly are gaining more and more attention from the community who feels they need to expend more time and energy," he added.

Combining efforts

More than 400 residents also packed a Sanibel meeting hall last week to discuss the poor water quality, and Rawl said a coalition of business leaders, environmentalists and real estate agents is forming.

A similar group of activists on the Treasure Coast, the Rivers Coalition, is expected to announce this week if the 40 member-organizations voted in favor of filing a lawsuit with Earthjustice against state and federal water managers.

Kevin Henderson, who is also a member of the Rivers Coalition's legal task force, said it's important for other parts of the state to protest about water managers to show state lawmakers that poor water quality is more than an isolated regional issue.

"We'll see if we can put together a coalition big enough and strong enough to out-compete the sugar industry," Henderson said. "That's the hard part, but that's the way politics works."

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