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Engineers expect to dump more water from Lake Okeechobee next week to protect its aging dike as the hurricane and rainy seasons approach.

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Lake Okeechobee, hammered by drought-driven lows over the past decade, brimmed Thursday with more than 15 feet of water. It will continue going up for several more days.

Problem is, South Florida's hurricane and rainy seasons are right around the corner. The big lake is rising when it ought to be falling.

That's not a good scenario for its aging dike or for aquatic life in the lake and river systems that will soon be getting big doses of dirty lake water. By next week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has been slowly trying to lower Lake O for months, will likely crank the flood gates open a lot wider.

"We would expect this during the wet season, but we're seeing it during the dry season," said Luis Alejandro, Lake Okeechobee basin manager for the Corps. "We are in the high end of the range we would like to see."

TAKING ACTION

Under a management plan the Corps adopted two years ago intended to balance water supply demands with environmental protection, the goal is to keep the lake's water between 12.5 and 15.5 feet above sea level. But the peak is supposed to come at the end of the wet and hurricane seasons, not before they begin.

The primary reason for the higher levels: an extra rainy winter and spring.

For the Corps, the most immediate concern is protecting the nearly 80-year-old earthen levee, currently undergoing a decades-long, expensive -- estimated at more than \$1 billion -- construction effort to beef it up.

"There is always a concern about dike safety," Alejandro said. "That's the highest priority for the Corps."

The lake is about a foot and a half above where the Corps would like to see it, and it's expected to continue rising for much of the week as runoff from Monday's heavy rains spill south down the Kissimmee River.

As the lake rises, the Corps increases its dike inspection, conducting daily reviews at 16.5 feet. Above that level, worries about leaks, seepage and more serious ruptures rise considerably.

Unseasonably high water levels also damage marsh plants that serve as shelter for bass and other fish.

The lake, the primary water supply for surrounding farms and towns and backup for the urban Southeast coast, typically falls in the winter and spring. But storms have reversed the trends this year.

In March, the Corps began a series of "pulse releases," relatively small discharges down its main drainage channels, the Caloosahatchee River on the west and the St. Lucie on the east. But the lake has risen nearly three-quarters of a foot since then, and the Corps is considering ratcheting up dumping when the pulses end on Tuesday.

After the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, the Corps dumped massive volumes of lake water to protect the dike, but polluted runoff ravaged estuaries, killing fish and triggering algae blooms. These releases won't be as large, but the water still won't be happily received on either coast.

WEIGHING OPTIONS

Alejandro said the Corps is exploring options, including sending some lake water into the Everglades. The South Florida Management District, under federal court orders to reduce phosphorous levels in the marsh, has discouraged that in past years.

With much of South Florida's basins full, Alejandro said there are few places to put excess lake water without raising flooding or environmental issues. Water managers and environmentalists tout Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial sugar land deal as the best way to resolve problems linked to the lake's roller-coaster water levels.

Concerns over the integrity of the dike -- built in the 1930s after hurricanes swamped Belle Glade and surrounding towns, killing 3,000 people -- intensified in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

In 2007, engineering experts hired by South Florida water managers issued an alarming report that said the dike was at high risk of breaching, a threat temporarily eliminated by record-low lake water levels.

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