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### Time to stop dumping lake water into the Caloosahatchee: Carla Johnston

05/19/2010

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News-Press

When Lake O contained too much water between 2005 and 2007 extraordinary efforts were made to protect Southwest Florida's pristine environment, our tourism, fishing, and real estate economy, and our quality of life.

The city of Sanibel, (because we are at the wrong end of the Lake O sewer pipe,) led the charge. Lee County government, other municipalities, the governor, business and The News-Press cooperated in unprecedented ways to solve an Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District problem. Progress occurred. Now, instead of anger, let's take action and implement the emergency plans!

The 2006 premise was that all governments have Emergency Operation Plans. Why shouldn't the Corps and the water management District? In emergencies, water needs to go somewhere other than down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, until Everglades restoration and the repairs to the dike around the lake are complete.

Sending even 450,000 acre-feet of water (approximately 1 foot of lake water) elsewhere can help relieve the Caloosahatchee. That much and more is possible.

At a May 16, 2006, Sanibel City Council meeting, water management district CEO Carole Wehle said 450,000 feet of storage capacity is available now. Army Corps staff said Water Conservation Areas can provide additional emergency storage. On Jan. 11, 2007, the district unanimously passed a resolution requesting the Corps to take into consideration availability of increased water storage capacity as relief for hardship caused by dumping water down the two rivers. The detail can be found in a Jan. 18, 2007, powerPoint and in the specific list of emergency storage land provided by Benita Whelan, Water Management District project manager for public private land storage initiative, and George Horne, district operations and maintenance director. Hopefully, now, three years later, this list has many updates.

The 2006-07 efforts to create emergency water storage relief gained remarkable momentum. The Governor's Office and the Legislature established the Northern Everglades district to slow water input to Lake O and to enable more storage. Gov. Charlie Crist initiated the plan to acquire land for a future flow way south. The SFWMD Board is helping accomplish that goal. The USACE and other government agencies are using stimulus monies to raise part of the Tamiami Trail to allow increased water flow toward the Everglades and they are working to fix the Lake O dike. At long last, we're moving toward solutions. Unprecedented stakeholder agreement supports emergency water storage. Agricultural interests and interior communities shared the self-interest of the coastal communities that it was foolish to dump so much water into the sea in 2006.

In other words, when USACE turns on the spigot, they need to point the water in multiple directions - not just toward the two rivers.

Here's the focal point for 2010 action.

Instead of lashing out in anger, let's finish the job. Let's implement the 2006-7 emergency water storage plans. Our environment,

our already battered tourism, fishing and real estate economy, and our quality of life is at stake.

- Carla Brooks Johnston is a former mayor of Sanibel.

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## Lake Okeechobee water dump continues despite environmental damage

05/18/2010

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Sun Sentinel - Online

While South Florida braces for oil spill pollution potentially reaching its shores, weeks of dumping Lake Okeechobee water out to sea to protect South Florida from flooding has already created an environmental emergency to the north.

Higher-than-usual lake levels combined with safety concerns about the lake's 70-year-old dike means the damaging discharges must continue into the summer rainy season, Col. Alfred Pantano Jr., the Army Corps of Engineers' commander for Florida, told Palm Beach County officials on Monday.

In addition to wasting lake water that serves as South Florida's backup drinking water supply, dumping the lake water out to sea is already threatening to wipe out sea grasses, oyster beds, sport fish and other marine life in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Coastal residents in Stuart and elsewhere accuse the corps of sacrificing their waterways instead of sending more Lake Okeechobee water to South Florida.

But on Tuesday, Pantano told Palm Beach County commissioners that the ability to send lake water south is limited by environmental regulations, storage capacity and logistical hang-ups.

East and west discharges remain the main routes to dump the water, and with hurricane season fast approaching, those discharges will continue, Pantano said.

"It's killing the estuaries, that's a fact," Pantano said. "We are willingly and knowingly damaging the ecosystem ? because protecting the public is foremost."

Pantano was in West Palm Beach on Tuesday to give an update on the slow-moving dike-rehab project. The nearly \$1 billion project is intended to protect lakeside communities from flooding and give the lake more water storage capacity.

Frustrated with delays, county commissioners have called for the corps to speed up the project. On Tuesday, they agreed to lobby Congress for more money to shorten the decades-long timetable.

They want a faster fix to avoid possible New Orleans-style flooding in lakeside communities and to stop the environmental damage along the coast.

Stormwater that flows into Lake Okeechobee from the north once naturally overflowed the lake's southern rim, slowly drifting south in sheets of water that fed the Everglades.

More than 70 years ago, as more farming and development moved onto land that used to be the Everglades, the lake was corralled by an earthen dike to contain flooding.

That turned the lake into South Florida's largest retention pond, used to capture flood waters and tapped for irrigation by growers to the south and to boost drinking water supplies.

During times of drought, low lake levels can lead to stiffened watering restrictions for South Florida. When the rains return, flooding concerns prompt the environmentally damaging discharges out to sea.

Now the lake's dike, threatened by erosion, is rated as one of the nation's most at risk of a breach.

The corps tries to keep the lake level between 12.5 feet and 15.5 feet above sea level. On Tuesday, the lake was 14.64 feet. One tropical storm can boost the lake 4 feet, so going into the summer rainy season the lake releases will have to continue to ease the strain on the dike, Pantano said.

Since 2007, contractors for the corps have built about 5 miles of a planned 22-mile stretch of reinforcing walls extending through the middle of the lake's earthen dike. The corps plans to finish the walls for the dike's southeastern rim, considered the most

vulnerable, by 2013.

Beyond 2013, the corps plans to build a berm along the outside base of the dike to help control the seepage that leads to damaging erosion. That requires acquiring more land, which will be a politically touchy subject in communities with homes and businesses built alongside the dike.

Finishing fixes for the rest of the 140-mile-long dike depends on the pace of federal funding.

"There's a lot at stake here, people's lives and property," Pantano said. "We have got to assure that we achieve quality."

South Florida water managers contend that the long-term solution to Lake Okeechobee discharges and other water problems is to build more reservoirs and treatment areas to store and clean up stormwater that could be used to boost drinking water supplies and replenish the Everglades.

The South Florida Water Management District is pursuing a \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres of farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. that could be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas, but that deal has been stalled by the cost and legal challenges.

The Lake Okeechobee dike could have been fixed long ago if it was more of a national priority, County Commission Chairman Burt Aaronson said. Instead of sending the corps to rebuild Iraq, the country should have spent its money on projects like reinforcing Lake Okeechobee's dike, Aaronson said.

"Put those resources that are over there in our own country," Aaronson said.

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