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Tammy Hall: Water district board must stop ignoring Caloosahatchee needs

Tammy Hall - Guest Opinion

Regretfully, Lee County finds itself, once again, asserting concerns with both the process and outcome of South Florida Water Management District actions to withhold much needed water releases from Lake Okeechobee to benefit the Caloosahatchee Estuary. Much like us, the Estuary needs fresh water to survive. On Dec. 9 the Governing Board of the Water Management District summarily dismissed the opportunity to make critical releases to the Caloosahatchee.

The SFWMD has continued a pattern of failing to properly provide notice to members of the public, including Lee County, where agency actions on Lake Okeechobee releases are formulated. Adding insult to injury, these actions are taken without stakeholder input or notice, as well as without the benefit of science or data substantively demonstrating the needs of The Estuary versus the implications on other water supply.

It seems the perceived need to maximize water supply in the lake almost always trumps the well-documented, yet seldom presented, needs of the Caloosahatchee.

While abnormally heavy rainfall in the region after the board's decision has lessened the need for environmental releases to the Caloosahatchee, it is likely that the need for fresh water from the lake will occur in the months to come. We would hope that when that occasion arises, that a comprehensive presentation of the importance of using public water for a public resource be made. Only then can the governing board fairly deliberate on such a critical decision. Looking to events in and around the spring of this year, our concerns become evident.

Focusing on Lake Okeechobee releases that occurred during the spring of 2009, we now have definitive data demonstrating that the environmental water supply releases to the Caloosahatchee did not, in any meaningful way, adversely impact or compromise water supply for the lower east coast or agricultural irrigation users in the Lake Okeechobee Service Area. In fact, the SFWMD staff analysis quantified the volume and relative impacts of Lake Okeechobee releases. Importantly, the cumulative releases to the Caloosahatchee Estuary constituted approximately 30,000 acre feet, or only 1.02 inches, of lake water. This is contrasted with amounts delivered for water supply purposes, which were many times larger.

Lee County supports the need to address these critical issues now. The SFWMD must:

- Define the concept of "shared adversity" during dry periods where the needs of permitted users and the needs of natural systems are reviewed evenly.
- Define when and how environmental water supply releases should be made to benefit and protect the Caloosahatchee Estuary.
- Describe the roles and responsibilities of the corps and the SFMWD in this decision-making process.

- Provide public notice on all Lake Okeechobee operational decisions and recommendations by the SFWMD.

- Establish a science-based informational format for Governing Board presentations.

It is our desire to continue to work with the SFWMD. In the future it is our expectation that the needs of the Caloosahatchee be afforded the same protections that this unique public resource deserves.

It is our desire to continue to work with the SFWMD. I would be remiss if not mentioning the strong support for making environmental releases last week from Governing Board members Charles Dauray and Shannon Estenoz. Charles and Shannon deserve our thanks. Other Governing Board members need to hear from you, their constituents in Southwest Florida. The waters of Lake Okeechobee are a public resource and should be used when at all possible to benefit another unique public resource, the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. In the future, it is our expectation that the needs of the Caloosahatchee be afforded the adequate concern that this public resource deserves.