

Blue Green Algae in the Caloosahatchee River

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By Commissioner Ray Judah

The presence of toxic blue-green algae upstream of the Franklin Lock and Dam in the Caloosahatchee River is a vivid reminder of the South Florida Water Management District's (SFWMD) failure to properly manage our precious water resources. Beholden to the powerful sugar industry, the SFWMD permits wasteful discharge of millions of gallons of fresh water from Lake Okeechobee to tide during the wet season. This provides optimum growing conditions for sugar cane, but results in excessive polluted water discharge to the Caloosahatchee and coastal estuaries. Further harm occurs in the dry season when the SFWMD shuts down minimum flow to the Caloosahatchee River needed to prevent harmful concentrations of algae and hypersaline conditions. The SFWMD, in fact, spends millions of dollars of tax payer's dollars to install and operate large pumps during drought conditions to direct water from Lake Okeechobee to the sugar cane fields while suspending any flow to the Caloosahatchee needed to protect habitat critical to the life cycle of our fisheries.

This cycle of destruction and degradation of our environment causes significant harm to our local economy and quality of life. The Lee County Health Department recently issued a Health Advisory precluding any human or animal contact with the Caloosahatchee due to the harmful blue-green algae blooms and the presence of toxic cyanobacteria. The vast media coverage of the health issues and the graphic images being aired throughout the world on the condition in the Caloosahatchee create a marked impact to our fragile tourism and real estate industries.

The SFWMD and the sugar industry would argue that the guidance document known as Adaptive Protocols, used to manage low water levels in Lake Okeechobee, authorizes water allocation exclusively to agriculture and utilities while restricting environmental releases to the Caloosahatchee. In fact, the Adaptive Protocols provide guidance to water managers for discretionary releases to protect the ecosystem. Furthermore, Chapter 373.042 and 373.0421 Florida Statutes require the SFWMD to declare and institute Phase III water restrictions (45 percent reductions) for all permitted users when our rivers and coastal estuaries experience significant harm.

It is not as if the dry conditions were not unforeseen. As early as the fall of 2010, the SFWMD was forecasting drier than normal conditions and the real potential for water shortages. Rather than implementing common sense cutbacks on agricultural and urban users, the SFWMD's only action was to recommend cutting off environmental releases to the Caloosahatchee. No action was taken until March 2011 when the SFWMD placed a modest 15 percent water reduction on agriculture and utilities. SFWMD did not call for 45 percent reduction to agricultural users until this month, well after the Caloosahatchee had suffered irrefutable harm and loss of all remaining fresh water grasses. It is unacceptable for the SFWMD to unilaterally cutoff the Caloosahatchee when other users are not required to institute meaningful water conservation measures.

The Caloosahatchee continues to suffer at the hands of policy decisions by the SFWMD. The Caloosahatchee estuary is suffering at a shockingly regular and continual rate. Providing minimum flow to the Caloosahatchee during the dry season would amount to about 5 inches from Lake Okeechobee. In contrast, water supply users are provided more than 2 feet of Lake water during this time. The Caloosahatchee is in its fourth consecutive year of not receiving minimum fresh water flow and level (MFL). The continual failure to meet the MFL for the Caloosahatchee has resulted in significant harm to the health, productivity and function of the Caloosahatchee and coastal estuaries.

Our hope for economic recovery is predicated on a healthy environment.

Gov. Scott and our Congressional and State delegations need to be held accountable in working with the SFWMD to protect the public interest and our waterways.