

Your Participation is Vital

Nowhere is citizen participation more important than in this water quality issue. The health of our estuaries, our economy, and our way of life are truly at stake if something cannot be done to change the way that Lake Okeechobee is managed. That change must occur today, not ten years from today or it will be too late for Southwest Florida's sensitive environment. Our state and federal leaders will make the decisions critical to our property values and our way of life.

Some of the most influential people who need to hear a message similar to what's been phrased on this issue's postcard include:

Governor Jeb Bush

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Fighting Words

"People of Sanibel are going to have to get some dirty water."

Words spoken by Col. Robert Carpenter to pit community against community instead of focusing on the inadequacies of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plan.

Taken from the July 12, 2006 edition of the Fort Myers News-Press

For more information regarding other key officials to contact about this issue, please visit the sanibelh2o.com website.



Shellfish Epidemic Declared after 6 Sent to Hospital

Photos by David Meardon



Thousands of dead fish, including this Goliath grouper, continue to wash ashore on Southwest Florida beaches following outbreaks of 5 different types of algae this summer

A major wave of concern washed over the island in mid-July after ten Sanibel visitors became ill from eating clams harvested in area waters. An 11th victim was reported on Fort Myers Beach and six visitors became so ill that they had to be hospitalized.

On July 18th, the Lee County Health Department declared a local epidemic and began requiring businesses to put up public notices. As City staff rushed to post warning notices at the Public Boat Ramp, marinas, and beaches, City Council discussed just how critical the concern about the local environment has become.

Though the waters where the shellfish were harvested were not open to recreational harvesting, City leaders are concerned that an outbreak of 5 different algae, including Red Tide, is behind the problem. Neurotoxic shellfish poisoning is often associated with red tide blooms and can cause numbness, tingling in the extremities, gastrointestinal symptoms and difficulty in speaking and walking.

We call on the Army Corps of Engineers and SFWMD to prove that these neurotoxic illnesses from contaminated shellfish are NOT related to the Lake O water releases, declared Council.

Council Calls For Emergency Deviation Plan for Wet Season 2006

As forecasters predict another active hurricane season, Sanibel City Leaders are calling on the U.S. Army Corps and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to immediately develop an emergency management plan for water releases from Lake Okeechobee for this rainy season. The plan must protect people from flooding and prevent the devastating releases that harmed area estuaries last year.

During a May Council meeting, representatives with the Army Corps did not present a re-assuring message, re-asserting that in extreme weather conditions, high level water releases to the Caloosahatchee would still be made.

Representatives with the South Florida Water Management District said that the district has identified land which could be used to store 450-thousand acre feet of water (146.6 billion gallons) if the Army Corps authorized using them as alternative emergency storage.

If the Corps authorized ongoing low level releases (up to 2800 cfs in wet season and 650 cfs in dry season) it will also help manage the lake to prevent threatening the dike.

But that partial solution might not be readily available because the Army Corps would have to authorize making use of the lands. Scientists are concerned that the impacts to area estuaries still trying to recover after 2 successive years of assault by polluted lake waters would be devastating. Algae blooms and nutrient and sediment laden water would smother sea grasses once again—with little or no chance of recovery. If the grasses can't recover, that affects the fish, the birds, the water quality and the beaches.

Printed on 10% PCW
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City of Sanibel
800 Dunlop Road
Sanibel, FL 33957



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Red Drift Algae Plagued Sanibel Beaches

In early May, an extensive amount of detached and decaying red filamentous algae reached the near shore waters and beaches of Sanibel, eventually extending along the entire island. This algae indicates high levels of nutrients in the water (nitrogen and phosphorous) and eutrophication (decay) of the entire near shore system. The most likely cause of this outbreak is the extreme levels of polluted water discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee River over the last several years. Evidence that the algae is related to lake and river run-off is immediately apparent. The algae is growing offshore along the coast directly at the mouth of the River where the Lake discharges entered the Gulf and no where else. The beaches impacted the most by the algae are likewise right at the mouth of the river on Sanibel and at Fort Myers Beach.



Massive amounts of decaying red filamentous algae along Blind Pass beaches caused sewage-like odors and made foraging for food difficult for shorebirds. At the time of printing, biologists continued to observe large rafts of algae off shore.

This red filamentous algae grows offshore on firm substrates and exposed reef areas. As the algae breaks off, it washes ashore. Scuba divers exploring near shore artificial reefs recently reported algae covering the reefs and only a fraction of the fish species normally seen this time of year.

This species of Ceramium is especially noxious in the way it decays, causing sewage-like odors, fouling surrounding waters and making food foraging difficult for shore birds.

City Appropriates Funds for Possible Litigation

On May 16th, the Sanibel City Council authorized that \$300,000.00 be transferred into a special City Account that will be used to pay attorney fees whether or not the City chooses to move forward with litigation against the U.S. Army Corps and South Florida Water Management District. Currently, attorneys with the Washington, D.C. law firm, "Beveridge and Diamond" are evaluating all possible legal options for City leaders to consider regarding the Lake Okeechobee water discharge issue.

Attorneys with the Washington law firm briefed Council members in June.

Environmental Defense Fund Created Citizens Can Now Contribute to the Cause

After being approached by a number of citizens, the Sanibel City Council voted to pass a Resolution creating an Environmental Legal Defense Fund to allow interested parties to contribute financially to the City's efforts to defend "the environmental resources of the City of Sanibel, its surrounding waters, bays and estuaries."

The Environmental Defense Fund is set up as a Special Revenue Fund in a separate account established by City Finance Director Renee Lynch. Contributions would be used to offset some of the costs related to prepare for litigation should it be needed, to engage in public education, political involvement, and lobbying efforts. This ties in with the City's 3-pronged approach to the water quality crisis: 1) public education, 2) political involvement, and, 3) if necessary, litigation.

Anyone who wishes to contribute can do so as an individual, business owner, agency or other interested entity.

How to Contribute

Simply write a check payable to the City of Sanibel with written instructions that the donation is specifically to be used for the new Environmental Legal Defense Fund.

Donations will be welcomed in person, at the Finance Department in City Hall, or by mail to:

City of Sanibel
800 Dunlop Road
Sanibel, FL

Attention: Renee Lynch, Finance Director

Estuaries Ignored

Army Corps Throws Out Recommended Option

As part of its charge to develop a new, improved regulation schedule to control water releases from Lake Okeechobee, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has established a "Project Development Team" (PDT) under the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule Study (LORSS), Water Supply Environment (WSE) Regulation Schedule program. The PDT is a multi-agency task force that has spent the last few months evaluating different potential alternative water regulation schedules. Agencies involved include individuals from the Corps, the South Florida Water Management District, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the City of Sanibel and Lee County communicating primarily by teleconference.

The PDT met in teleconference sessions numerous times over the last several months comparing and evaluating mathematical modeling results and performance measures for the approximately 17 different alternatives initially proposed by the Corps. Analyses were based on a weighted mathematical comparison of how well the alternatives performed for the St. Lucie, the Caloosahatchee, the Everglades, the Lake, the Hoover Dike and Water Supply. Through this evaluation process, all agencies were involved in reducing the number of alternative schedules that they preferred down to six, with one of those being the existing WSE or the "do nothing" alternative. Final model runs were evaluated, final weightings were assigned based on the comparative importance of performance measures for each alternative and, on May 11, all agencies (except the Corps) provided the PDT with the alternative(s) that they thought were the best. All agencies reporting except the EPA agreed that alternative 1aS2 was the most balanced and was the preferred alternative with the EPA agreeing that 1aS2 was acceptable.

From the City of Sanibel, Lee County and SFWMD viewpoint, this selection was really simple. 1aS2 was the only alternative among the choices provided



Literally tons of red filamentous algae washed ashore on a number of Sanibel beach areas in May, prompting complaints and resulting in some tourist cancellations at resorts. Concerns remain that the rotting algae may be affecting water quality and threatening marine life.

by the Corps that reduced the number of heavy discharges from the Lake to the Caloosahatchee according to the modeling run results. All other alternatives, at least according to the modeling, were worse than the current WSE, the "do nothing" alternative.

Following a presentation by the Corps staff to Colonel Carpenter on May 15th, the Corps suddenly announced that alternative 1aS2 was eliminated from all future consideration and analysis, and that 3 alternatives, 2A, 4 and 1bS2, all poor performers for the estuary according to the modeling results provided, were the only ones that would be considered or further evaluated. This essentially meant that all the efforts previously made by the PDT members were rendered null and void. The reasoning given was that because of concerns regarding the condition of the Herbert Hoover Dike, only those alternatives that performed the best for the Lake and the Dike were to be considered.

The progression of the LORSS

process to date is therefore extremely disappointing and shows a potential built-in bias against estuary concerns that may hurt our ability to successfully achieve progress in eliminating the destructive lake releases to the Caloosahatchee. We need both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to both commit to improving decisions regarding estuary releases and we are just not seeing that commitment.

Citizens can help by taking part in the enclosed postcard campaign.

City of Sanibel leaders have declared water quality as their top priority, striving for tangible results using 3 different tools.

Sanibel's 3-Pronged Approach to the Water Quality Issue

1. Public education
2. Political involvement
3. If necessary, litigation