

Water Management District has no excuses

By Barbara Joy Cooley, president, Committee of the Islands

While many are rightfully very concerned about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, here on Sanibel we are already being hit by an environmental disaster involving our estuaries and coastal waters.

Just as in 2004 and 2005, massive amounts of polluted fresh water are now being released from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee. Just as in 2004 and 2005, Lake Okeechobee is dangerously full and water *must* be released from it by the Army Corps of Engineers.

The environment committee of the Committee of the Islands remembers that five years ago, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) promised Sanibel that it would provide 450,000 acre-feet of temporary water storage – enough to take one foot of water off the Lake – so that the next time we had unusual rains they would not have to force the Corps to release so much damaging water into the Caloosahatchee.

We've had unusual rains. This unusually *wet* dry season was predicted last October. Where's the 450,000 acre-feet of storage? Good question.

There seems to be no good answer forthcoming from the SFWMD. Of the 450,000 acre-feet, the SFWMD claims to have provided 126,350 acre-feet. But much of that storage is not really available now and it is not being used. And none of it is south of the Lake, where we need it to be.

Why weren't contracts with the landowners ready to go, since the SFWMD clearly must have known this 450,000 acre-feet of storage would be needed now? The SFWMD has no answer. In spite of having the knowledge that this disaster was coming, the SFWMD did not act. Now the Army Corps has no choice.

Early in May, huge releases of 4,000 cubic feet per second were made from Lake O into the Caloosahatchee, and we saw the ugly brown Lake water in our bay and even circling around the lighthouse end of the island. As I write this, the releases have lessened only to about 3,000 cubic feet per second. That's still way too much. And the official rainy season has not yet begun.

At risk are our seagrass and oyster beds, fish, scallops and crabs. We're losing our "crop" of sea life.

Why isn't this happening?

Meanwhile, agriculture south of the Lake suffers not at all. In early May, Sarah Heard, a Martin County commissioner, flew over the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of the Lake and noted that the ditches there were all dry. Why doesn't the EAA share the adversity? Again, the SFWMD has no good answer for this.

Water could be released from the Lake and sent through canals to the southeast and out to tide. Why isn't this happening? Sugar cane fields can withstand being flooded for a couple weeks at this time of year without significant damage. Why isn't this happening? Again, the SFWMD has no good answers.

In noting that agriculture benefits and does not suffer at times like this, John Cassani, a south Florida limnologist (a scientist who studies fresh water bodies like lakes), observed that even during droughts

“Their [agriculture’s] influence starves the estuary for water despite a MFL [minimum flow level] passed since 2001. The Caloosahatchee estuary is continually damaged year in and year out as a result. This occurs even when water use restrictions on agriculture are absent. When there is excess [water] they refuse to share in any type of resolution or shared adversity. Also, remember they pay nothing for their water (a public resource), have federal price support subsidies, and the public pays for most of their pollution clean-up. This is a scam on the people of Florida of monumental proportions.” He’s right.

Of course the long-term solution is to restore water flow from the Lake to the south, into the Everglades, as Mother Nature intended. An important part of that long-term solution is the purchase of U.S. Sugar Corporation land by the state of Florida.

The long-term solution does not help us right now. What would have helped us now would have been if the SFWMD had acted to provide the temporary storage they said they would provide.

You can help by keeping the pressure on the governing board of the SFWMD. Their contact information can be found on the web at <http://www.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/portal/levelthree/governing%20board>

You can also help by letting Governor Crist know about your concerns. He appoints the governing board members. His email address is Charlie.Crist@MyFlorida.com, and phone number is 850-488-7146.

More information is available from the Committee of the Islands at www.coti.org. Send your input on this important matter to coti@coti.org.