

Editorial:

The new executive director of the South Florida Water Management District wants 'patience'? Only results will satisfy South Florida residents jaded by decades of bureaucratic failures
--TCPalm

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Memo to Melissa Meeker, the new executive director of the South Florida Water Management District: Treasure Coast residents served by the district — and others throughout the district's 16-county service area in South Florida — are all out of patience.

Speaking recently to members of the Rivers Coalition in Stuart, Meeker repeatedly enjoined the organization to be "patient" with the district's efforts to preserve the St. Lucie Estuary. "We have two administrations (in Washington and Tallahassee) focused on what's best for the (Everglades) and a team at the district that knows what to do," Meeker said. "That can only benefit this region. I'm sorry that there won't be any immediate relief to the estuary, but we are headed in the right direction."

Setting aside the claim we have an administration in Tallahassee "focused on what's best for the Everglades" — ludicrous on its face — Meeker's apology and plea for patience falls squarely on deaf ears.

Patience? The public has been waiting decades for the water management district — and the state and federal governments — to restore the natural flow of the Everglades (south, not east and west) and stop the voluminous dumping of nutrient-laden fresh water into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers.

Residents in Martin and St. Lucie counties have witnessed firsthand the disastrous effects of the district's failed water policies.

Twice in the past 13 years, discharges from Lake Okeechobee have created an ecological crisis in the St. Lucie. First it was the "lesion fish" in 1998, followed in 2005 by an algae bloom that suffocated oxygen from the water and turned the South Fork of the St. Lucie River bright green.

Our region has been spared this calamity this year. Residents on Florida's west coast — also served by the South Florida Water Management District — haven't been so lucky. A toxic algae bloom — similar to those we've experienced in the past — is fouling the Caloosahatchee River. To inform the public, the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation has been running full-page ads in west coast newspapers. One ad states, in part, "The Caloosahatchee is shouldering the burden for years of mismanagement of our most precious resource — water."

Patience?

Hopes soared in 2000 when the state and federal governments launched the ambitious, \$10 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. However, year after year, the federal government failed to provide adequate funding. Many projects that were funded went ... nowhere.

In February 2009, Earth magazine summarized a decade of CERP's failures. In the article, "Everglades restoration efforts make dismal progress," author Mary Caperton Morton noted: "According to the National Research Council, none of CERPs 50 projects have been completed and even relatively modest proposals, such as the Tamiami Trail bridge project, which would elevate a highway blocking marsh water flow, have been derailed by contentious politics, litigation and soaring costs."

Local residents don't have to look far for examples. Consider the Ten Mile Creek project near Fort Pierce: The \$30 million reservoir — completed in 2006 and designed to draw in and clean water from Ten Mile Creek before it is released into the North Fork of the St. Lucie River — is not operational because of concerns about the integrity of the reservoir constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It may never be completed.

Patience?

We're tired of the seemingly endless promises made by governors, interior secretaries, congressmen and senators who've toured the Everglades and produced nothing more than expensive photo-ops. Their words ring hollow.

After billions of dollars have been spent and untold hours have been invested, there is still no southern flow-way from Lake Okeechobee, and voluminous discharges of toxic water continue to foul our estuaries.

Patience?

We're all out.

Only results will satisfy South Florida residents jaded by years of bureaucratic failures and false promises — and noxious requests for "patience."