

Editorial

Synopsis/ White Paper

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White Paper, Green River

Sugar first, Stuart last.

Those four words, I'm afraid, summarize our state's water management priorities.

It takes 3,725 words, however, to cover all the bases in a new "white paper" from the Rivers Coalition's 14-member Legal Task Force.

This comprehensive look at how our St. Lucie River is ruined by monumental discharges from Lake Okeechobee is titled:

"Killing the St. Lucie River, How Politics and Wasteful Projects Have Rendered a Great River Unfit for Human Contact, Damaged the Economy and Destroyed Plants and Wildlife."

The first two paragraphs describe today's crisis:

The St. Lucie River is now damaged to the point that it is a human health hazard. Fish and wildlife are virtually gone. Recreation on the river has nearly ceased. An historic river has been judged by the Florida Health Department to be unsafe for human contact.

Lives and the economy are affected by this ongoing disaster as never before. Legal action is no longer optional, it is necessary to obtain adequate changes in water management. There must be short-term recovery reforms while longer-term plans and projects of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and other programs are supported and implemented.

The what-can-be-done-about-it report cites findings of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council and others, concluding:

We find that the Army Corps and Water Management District must take the following steps to eliminate or radically reduce the discharges from Lake Okeechobee:

Maintain much lower water levels in Lake Okeechobee

Increase water storage in the Everglades Agricultural Area

Authorize the Indian River Lagoon component of CERP and the entire program

Accelerate development and purchase of storage areas north of Lake Okeechobee

Complete the Modified Water Deliveries to the Everglades National Park

Reduce phosphorus loading into the watersheds.

The Florida Health Department has warned citizens and visitors in Martin County, in all-capital letters, to AVOID CONTACT WITH WATER IN THE ST. LUCIE RIVER.

Although the warning against swimming has just now been lifted, at least temporarily, it's doubtful that many folks want to dip even a toe in such nasty waters.

Most of us find the conditions to be an appalling. Intolerable.

Health and wildlife problems, not to mention the sheer ugliness of our water, is caused by the unnatural discharge to us of some 150 billion gallons of polluted water a year from Lake Okeechobee. Those 150 thousand million gallons are shunted off to us (and even more to the west coast) to provide drainage of wetlands for the primary purpose of growing sugar in the Everglades Agricultural Area just south of the lake.

The White Paper explains that a much-ballyhooed state recovery plan will help in some ways, but real recovery is impossible as long as officials give absolute top priority to providing perfect

drainage and water supply to Big Sugar. Much of that reclaimed land must go wet, as Mother Nature wants it.

A bizarre irony is that Big Sugar doesn't even need the colossal amount of water that has been allowed to build up annually in Lake Okeechobee through the 90s. Engineering calculations clearly show that water is kept disastrously high "just in case," but never needed, whereupon it floods the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers with tons of phosphorus that sickens people, drives away wildlife and creates the horrid perfume of blue-green algae.

"This is criminal; it's got to be against the law," is a common exclamation on the streets of Stuart nowadays.

After all, the state constitution itself plainly directs the state "to conserve and protect its natural resources and scenic beauty."

But pleas, petitions, legal actions and no amount of protests have been able to cope with millions of dollars of lobbying power that has kept politicians from facing up to the discharge woes and ruination of Lake Okeechobee, which is in its worst shape in known history.

Now, however, the nation's premier environmental law firm, the non-profit EarthJustice, is exploring every possibility of action. Its legal eagles are encouraged, though cautious.

Although much of EarthJustice's resources will be backed by its national war chest, a lawsuit will still be expensive, very expensive, because of expert assistance, technical research and myriad out of pocket costs. The Drainage Establishment is a Goliath, even though David may have justice on his team.

That's where a new Rivers Coalition Defense Fund comes in. It will be calling for help from all citizens, corporate entities and advocates everywhere.

True, we're besieged by relief drives. But the St. Lucie deserves some of our most intense attention. She's worth it.

The complete White Paper and other info may be seen at RiversCoalition.org.

Karl Wickstrom, founder of Stuart-based Florida Sportsman Magazine, is a member of the Legal Task Force which drafted the Rivers Coalition White Paper and he has long been active in numerous environmental groups.