Lake Okeechobee releases show need for land buy: Editorial

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The Army Corps of Engineers has opened up the Lake Okeechobee faucet, which sends a shiver up the spines of those who remember the devastating releases of polluted lake water a few years ago.

But while the effects of the current releases are being watched carefully, they should not be anything like as damaging as the much larger surges after the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005. But they remind us that our Caloosahatchee River and its valuable coastal estuary are still used as a storm sewer for excess lake water, heavy with agricultural nutrients that have caused devastating algae blooms downriver and upset the salinity the estuary needs to function as a marine life factory.

Water has to be released from the lake if levels rise high enough to threaten the dike that protects lakeside communities, where storm flooding in the 1920s killed thousands.

The lake level is up because of recent rains and has to be lowered to make room for storage of water from the summer wet season and - we hope - make huge releases unnecessary.

But the danger will be with us until the state acquires the land south of the lake needed to recreate a southern flowway. That will allow lake overflow to go where nature intended it to go, into the Everglades to restore that system.

That's why we should take every opportunity to urge completion of the purchase of U.S. Sugar company land that would be part of the southern flowway project.

The current surge in the Caloosahatchee, 1.42 billion gallons a day, should be reminder enough.