<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Reporter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida Bay's Ecosystem Feared on Brink of Collapse</td>
<td>08/17/2009</td>
<td>Ledger - Online, The</td>
<td>BRIAN SKOLOFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Sugar land buy needed for Everglades, economy</td>
<td>08/16/2009</td>
<td>Sun-Sentinel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVERGLADES RESTORATION U.S. SUGAR LAND A GREAT OPPORTUNITY</td>
<td>08/16/2009</td>
<td>Sun Sentinel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once-in-a-lifetime chance to restore Everglades</td>
<td>08/16/2009</td>
<td>Tampa Tribune - Online</td>
<td>ERIC BUERMANN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Bay is filled with heated debates</td>
<td>08/16/2009</td>
<td>San Francisco Chronicle - Online</td>
<td>Brian Skoloff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Commentary U.S. Sugar land purchase vital to vision of Everglades restoration</td>
<td>08/15/2009</td>
<td>Naples Daily News - Online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither dry nor drowned, Lake Okeechobee's ecosystem is sound for the first time in years</td>
<td>08/15/2009</td>
<td>Palm Beach Post - Online</td>
<td>PAUL QUINLAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Okeechobee's ecosystem is sound for the first time in years</td>
<td>08/15/2009</td>
<td>News Press - Online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTENTIAL LANDFILL SITE RAISING CONCERNS</td>
<td>08/15/2009</td>
<td>Sun Sentinel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FL U.S., Florida reach Everglades restoration deal</td>
<td>08/15/2009</td>
<td>Stateline.org</td>
<td>CURTIS MORGAN</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Florida Bay's Ecosystem Feared on Brink of Collapse
08/17/2009
Ledger - Online, The
BRIAN SKOLOFF
Florida Bay is a sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, covering nearly three times the area of New York City.

ISLAMORADA | Boat captain Tad Burke looks out over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

He's been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

"Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population," says Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations - Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys - but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

Florida Bay is a sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, covering nearly three times the area of New York City.

The headwaters of the Everglades - starting some 300 miles north near Orlando - used to end up here after flowing south in a shallow sheet like a broad, slow-moving river, filtering through miles of muck, marsh and sawgrass.

Historically, the bay thrived on that perfect mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. It was a virtual Garden of Eden, home to a bounty of wading birds, fish, sea grasses and sponges.

But to the north of the bay, man's unforgiving push to develop South Florida has left the land dissected with roads, dikes and miles of flood control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater flow and slowly killing the bay.

The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs.

"If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here," Burke says. "When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction.

"You could argue that the bay has already collapsed," he adds.

Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. "Their fates are one and the same."

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl.

"Having that water coming down from the Everglades is key," says Rob Clift of the National Parks Conservation Association. "It has to be restored."

Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone.

"It's really aggravating," Burke says. "We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay."

A litany of lawsuits filed by parties favoring one solution over another are partly to blame, says Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

Name an environmental group, and the agency has been sued by them. Wehle calls them "obstructionists."

"There are a handful of people that choose not to participate in this process and instead use litigation, and who is losing? The environment is losing," Wehle says.
The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly.

It's the tribe and a few others who now have the district back in court as part of an effort to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar Corp.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for actual projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with all the new land.

"Meeting upon meeting, and the Everglades continues to die," Lorion says.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

---

**U.S. Sugar land buy needed for Everglades, economy**

08/16/2009
Sun-Sentinel

It makes sense to invest in purchasing the land from U.S. Sugar and other agricultural owners for the restoration of the Florida Everglades.

Biscayne Bay and Everglades National Park need the restoration of water flow from a restored Everglades ecosystem. At the same time, highly polluted water would be cleaned as part of the Everglades restoration process. Right now, this water is being released to our estuaries and is damaging fish and other wildlife.

Environmental restoration could generate jobs right away and would be an excellent stimulus to our economy. Let's move forward on Everglades restoration for the good of our economy and the environment.

Drew Martin, chairman, Everglades Committee, Sierra Club, Lake Worth

---

**EVERGLADES RESTORATION U.S. SUGAR LAND A GREAT OPPORTUNITY**

08/16/2009
Sun Sentinel

There is no mistaking the groundswell of support for the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. Leaders in national, state and local governments have publicly endorsed the acquisition, calling it, in the words of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, "an historic turning point for the largest watershed restoration project in the world."

Environmental groups, the watchdogs of restoration progress, have proclaimed this an important step forward, a "priceless, breathtaking opportunity." And newspapers from Miami to Pensacola, as well as others across the nation, agree with our view: that this is "fresh hope"-in the opinion of the New York Times - for restoring America's Everglades.

This makes the legal challenge by a small minority of interests who oppose the land acquisition a frustrating step along the path to progress. To be clear, their challenge does not oppose environmental improvements. It does not question the need for more water storage and treatment. Instead, the challengers are using the procedural step of court validation of the District's bonds for financing the acquisition as an attempt to simply block the deal.

Let me remind the naysayers where this land purchase will take us. Owning vast acreage south of Lake Okeechobee presents an unprecedented opportunity for water storage and treatment - the very backbone of the restoration success. More reservoirs will mean fewer freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their fragile estuaries. More treatment marshes will improve delivery of cleaner water to the water conservation areas and Everglades National Park. And the once-common practice of "backpumping" water into Lake Okeechobee will become a thing of the past.
These environmental benefits are important to South Florida's future, and we stand on the brink of acquiring the land to achieve them. At no other time in recent history - including when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was developed in the 1990s - has acreage of this magnitude been made available to the public to serve our collective needs. Indeed, if such acreage had been available when CERP was being designed, the framework of projects for Everglades restoration would have turned out very differently.

In negotiating this exceptional purchase, we at the district have prudently modified the contract terms to reflect changing fiscal realities. We have identified key parcels for the initial acquisition. And we have moved steadily forward with a public planning process to put the best project ideas on the table.

When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this arises, it takes vision and resolve to move forward despite attempts by a vocal minority to throw down roadblocks. I can assure you that we see the vision. And we are resolved to build a healthier environment for South Florida. Now is the time to make this happen.

Eric Buermann is chairman, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board

Copyright © 2009 Sun-Sentinel

---

**Once-in-a-lifetime chance to restore Everglades**

08/16/2009

Tampa Tribune - Online

ERIC BUERMANN

There is no mistaking the groundswell of support for the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. Leaders in national, state and local governments have publicly endorsed the acquisition, calling it, in the words of the secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, "an historic turning point for the largest watershed restoration project in the world."

Environmental groups, the watchdogs of restoration progress, have proclaimed this an important step forward, a "priceless, breathtaking opportunity." And newspapers from Miami to Pensacola, as well as others across the nation, agree with our view: that this is "fresh hope" - in the opinion of The New York Times - for protecting and restoring America's Everglades.

This makes the legal challenge by a small minority of interests who oppose the land acquisition a frustrating step along the path to progress. To be clear, their challenge does not oppose environmental improvements. It does not question the need for more water storage and treatment. Instead, the challengers are using the procedural step of court validation of the water management district's bonds for financing the acquisition as an attempt to simply block the deal.

Let me remind the naysayers where this land purchase will take us. Owning vast acreage south of Lake Okeechobee presents an unprecedented opportunity for water storage and treatment - the very backbone of restoration success. More reservoirs will mean fewer freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their fragile estuaries. More treatment marshes will improve delivery of cleaner water to the water conservation areas and Everglades National Park. And the once-common practice of "backpumping" water into Lake Okeechobee will become a thing of the past.

These environmental benefits are important to South Florida's future, and we stand on the brink of acquiring the land to achieve them.

At no other time in recent history - including when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was developed in the 1990s - has acreage of this magnitude been made available to the public to serve our collective needs. Indeed, if such acreage had been available when CERP was being designed, the framework of projects for Everglades restoration would have turned out very differently.

In negotiating this exceptional purchase, we at the district have prudently modified the contract terms to reflect changing fiscal realities.

We have identified key parcels for the initial acquisition.
And we have moved steadily forward with a public planning process to put the best project ideas on the table.

When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this arises, it takes vision and resolve to move forward despite attempts by a vocal minority to throw down roadblocks.

I can assure you that we see the vision.

And we are resolved to build a healthier environment for South Florida.

Now is the time to make this happen.

Eric Buermann is chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.

---

**Florida Bay is filled with heated debates**

08/16/2009
San Francisco Chronicle - Online
Brian Skoloff
(08-16) 04:00 PDT Islamorada, Fla.

Boat captain Tad Burke looks over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

Santa Cruz County fire grows to 5,036 acres 08.14.09
Richmond bridge killings suspect: 'I'm guilty' 08.14.09
Would-be assassin 'Squeaky' Fromme is paroled 08.14.09
Driver shot to death after San Pablo exchange 08.15.09

He has been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

"Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population," said Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations - Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys - but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

Florida Bay is a sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, covering nearly three times the area of New York City.

The headwaters of the Everglades - starting some 300 miles north near Orlando - used to end up here after flowing south in a shallow sheet like a broad, slow-moving river, filtering through miles of muck, marsh and saw grass.

Historically, the bay thrived on that perfect mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. It was a virtual Garden of Eden, home to a bounty of wading birds, fish, sea grasses and sponges.

But to the north of the bay, man's unforgiving push to develop South Florida has left the land dissected with roads, dikes and miles of flood-control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater flow and slowly killing the bay.

The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs.

"If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here," Burke
said. "When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction.

"You could argue that the bay has already collapsed," he added.

Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," said Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. "Their fates are one and the same."

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever.

"Having that water coming down from the Everglades is key," said Rob Clift of the National Parks Conservation Association. "It has to be restored."

Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water-treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And though land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone.

"It's really aggravating," Burke said. "We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay."

A litany of lawsuits filed by parties favoring one solution over another is partly to blame, said Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

Name an environmental group, and the agency has been sued by them.

Although pro-environment groups say their lawsuits are not designed to stop restoration - but to improve projects - litigation inevitably creates delays. And some plaintiffs, like Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer which farms in the Everglades, are trying to protect their business.

Wehle calls them all "obstructionists," including the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians who had her agency back in court Aug. 6 for closing arguments in yet another lawsuit.

"There are a handful of people that choose not to participate in this process and instead use litigation, and who is losing? The environment is losing," Wehle said.

The Miccosukee, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. In the current case, the tribe and Florida Crystals are trying to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from another sugar giant, U.S. Sugar Corp.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for restoration projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with the new land. Florida Crystals also argues the purchase would give its main competitor an unfair business advantage.

"Meeting upon meeting, and the Everglades continues to die," Lorion said.

Back on Florida Bay, Burke simply wants something done before it's too late. To the casual visitor, the area is stunning even today. Burke knows better.

"In a lot of ways," he said, "it's still pristine and beautiful down here, but it's also on its last dying breath."
Guest Commentary U.S. Sugar land purchase vital to vision of Everglades restoration
08/15/2009
Naples Daily News - Online

There is no mistaking the groundswell of support for the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. Leaders in national, state and local governments have publicly endorsed the acquisition, calling it, in the words of the secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, “an historic turning point for the largest watershed restoration project in the world.”

Environmental groups, the watchdogs of restoration progress, have proclaimed this an important step forward, a “priceless, breathtaking opportunity.” And newspapers from Miami to Pensacola, as well as others across the nation, agree with our view: that this is “fresh hope” — in the opinion of The New York Times — for protecting and restoring America's Everglades.

This makes the legal challenge by a small minority of interests who oppose the land acquisition a frustrating step along the path to progress. To be clear, their challenge does not oppose environmental improvements. It does not question the need for more water storage and treatment. Instead, the challengers are using the procedural step of court validation of the district’s bonds for financing the acquisition as an attempt to simply block the deal.

Let me remind the naysayers where this land purchase will take us. Owning vast acreage south of Lake Okeechobee presents an unprecedented opportunity for water storage and treatment — the very backbone of restoration success. More reservoirs will mean fewer freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their fragile estuaries. More treatment marshes will improve delivery of cleaner water to the water-conservation areas and Everglades National Park. And the once-common practice of “backpumping” water into Lake Okeechobee will become a thing of the past.

These environmental benefits are important to South Florida's future, and we stand on the brink of acquiring the land to achieve them. At no other time in recent history — including when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was developed in the 1990s — has acreage of this magnitude been made available to the public to serve our collective needs. Indeed, if such acreage had been available when CERP was being designed, the framework of projects for Everglades restoration would have turned out very differently.

In negotiating this exceptional purchase, we at the water management district have prudently modified the contract terms to reflect changing fiscal realities. We have identified key parcels for the initial acquisition. And we have moved steadily forward with a public planning process to put the best project ideas on the table.

When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this arises, it takes vision and resolve to move forward despite attempts by a vocal minority to throw down roadblocks. I can assure you that we see the vision. And we are resolved to build a healthier environment for South Florida. Now is the time to make this happen.

Buermann is of counsel in the Miami office of global law firm Squire, Sanders & Dempsey LLP, focusing his practice on government and international affairs. Trained as a real-estate lawyer with expertise in land and water use rights, he is also active in environmental and political issues. Gov. Charlie Crist asked Buermann to serve on his transition team, leading the review of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection. He currently also serves as chairman of the Miami River Commission and is a member of the board of overseers for the National Tropical Botanical Garden (Miami facility).

He was also a director for the Zoological Society of Florida, the support organization for Miami-Dade County's Metro Zoo. Buermann is a member of the National Audubon Society and Fairchild Tropical Garden.

Neither dry nor drowned, Lake Okeechobee's ecosystem is sound for the first time in years
08/15/2009
Palm Beach Post - Online
Paul Quinlan
From the deck of an airboat floating atop Lake Okeechobee, Paul Gray can see all the way to the bottom, through 5 feet of crystalline water where bass, crappie and swarms of minnows dart through a wavy lattice of lush hydriella.

"This is just gorgeous - it's what you hope the lake looks like," said Gray, a soft-spoken scientist from Audubon of Florida.

See more wildlife photos

The Lake Okeechobee dike

A Post special report

Potential nightmare for Glades residents

Experts say the Herbert Hoover Dike is prone to collapse, endangering thousands of people.

Hurricane coverage

All too often, the state's largest lake is either too full or too empty, encircled as it is by a three-story-tall dike beneath Florida's fitful, drought-or-downpour skies. High water renders the lake a choppy, murky mess. Drought can turn its shallow western fisheries into weed-choked prairies.

This may be short-lived, but Lake Okeechobee is in rare form today. It has rebounded perfectly from the 2004 hurricanes and the record-breaking, two-year drought that began in 2006.

"This is the second time in 15 years it's been this nice," Gray said.

In the northwestern shallows, American lotus sprout flowers as big as softballs and floppy green leaves the size of sombreros. Tiny white apple-snail eggs cluster on the green stems of needle rush and bulrush.

Dark green clumps of periphyton algae float on the glassy surface like cooked spinach, forming the base of a teeming food chain that has made the lake one of the best fishing destinations in the United States. It is also the last stop for more than 270 species of migratory birds on their way to the Caribbean and South America.

"The lake's probably in better shape than it's been in 10 years," said Harlan Griggs, who manages the marine center at the Roland Martin Marina in Clewiston and took third in last weekend's Xtreme Bass Fishing Series tournament.

The tournament's winner hauled in a nearly 28-pound catch - almost three times as much as last August's champ and almost twice as much as the 17-pound win in 2007.

"If you can catch 15, 16, 17 pounds of fish, you're doing good," Griggs said. "But when you start catching 20 or 25 pounds of fish, that's a testament."

During a recent visit to a swath of shallow lake marsh called Indian Prairie, hundreds of birds took off at the sound of an airboat, forming the only cloud in the sky - herons, ibises, egrets, the pink-feathered spoonbills and black-necked stilts. Sandpipers scooted across a crop of water lilies.

"For a couple years, this was bone dry," said Gray, stepping out of the boat to wade barefoot through the 6 inches of bathtub-temperature water.

Nearby, two small channels ran parallel into the distance - tire tracks from a truck that drove out here during the drought, when arsonists, at times, set fire to what is now lake bottom.

"It burned like crazy," Gray said.

Lake Okeechobee, the historic heart of the Everglades, once overflowed like a giant saucer to send broad sheets of water south into the giant marsh.

But like the rest of the Everglades, it teeters on the brink of collapse, thanks to 19th- and 20th-century efforts to open surrounding lands for farming and development.

After World War II, the Army Corps of Engineers straightened the Kissimmee River, which flows from the north, and finished walling off the lake behind the 140-mile Herbert Hoover Dike. Those projects turned Lake Okeechobee, which also serves as South Florida's backup water supply, into a polluted rain barrel.
Some call the lake Central Florida's toilet bowl. But unlike a toilet, it's impossible to flush. Phosphorus, an ingredient in manure and fertilizer that is the scourge of the Everglades ecosystem, now pours in from farms in huge quantities through the Kissimmee River.

So much phosphorus has accumulated that it would take centuries to eliminate it all at the current rate of removal.

Meanwhile, the same South Florida water managers in charge of cleaning the lake are consumed with another mammoth task, Gov. Charlie Crist's $536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar, aimed at restoring Everglades to the south.

The greatest short-term threat to the lake is the wild fluctuation of its water levels.

After the busy hurricane season of 2004, which added 6 feet to the lake and sprung leaks in the dike, "everything you see here was gone," said Gray, pointing across Cody's Cove. "This was just open, dirty water."

Today, a reddish water fern called an azolla graces the lake's surface like a blush.

The corps strives to keep the lake's water levels lower today than it did in years past - between 12.5 and 15.5 feet above sea level - with the aim of protecting the Herbert Hoover Dike and the health of the lake.

Holding water levels within that range is "a lot to ask for the lake today," said Paul McCormick, the chief Lake Okeechobee scientist for the South Florida Water Management District.

Last fall, Tropical Storm Fay raised the lake 4 feet, making up more than half of the 7-foot plunge it had experienced during the 2007-08 drought.

When the lake gets too full, water stirs up sediments that block sunlight from reaching underwater vegetation, which quickly dies off. Even the shallowest parts of the lake were so murky after the 2004 hurricanes that Gray said he could not see his hand in 6 inches of water. When the lake rises, wading birds can't reach deep enough to snag fish.

Years of abnormally high water also eroded the aging dike, which now awaits $980 million in repairs that won't be coming any time soon.

Under the corps' newly preferred water levels, the lake will reach about 15.5 feet in January and recede over the course of the dry season to 12.5 feet in June. That's essentially what happened in the past year.

But the rain rarely cooperates so well.

"For years, it was just dirty - no plants, no chance of plants," Gray said. "The best news of all is that the lake is very resilient."

---

**Lake Okeechobee's ecosystem is sound for the first time in years**

08/15/2009

News Press - Online
Palm Beach Post  August 15, 2009

From the deck of an airboat floating atop Lake Okeechobee, Paul Gray can see all the way to the bottom, through 5 feet of crystalline water where bass, crappie and swarms of minnows dart through a wavy lattice of lush hydrilla.

"This is just gorgeous - it's what you hope the lake looks like," said Gray, a soft-spoken scientist from Audubon of Florida.

All too often, the state's largest lake is either too full or too empty, encircled as it is by a three-story-tall dike beneath Florida's fitful, drought-or-downpour skies. High water renders the lake a choppy, murky mess. Drought can turn its shallow western fisheries into weed-choked prairies.

This may be short-lived, but Lake Okeechobee is in rare form today. It has rebounded perfectly from the 2004 hurricanes and the record-breaking, two-year drought that began in 2006.

"This is the second time in 15 years it's been this nice," Gray said.

In the northwestern shallows, American lotus sprout flowers as big as softballs and floppy green leaves the size of sombreros. Tiny white apple-snail eggs cluster on the green stems of needle rush and bulrush.

Dark green clumps of periphyton algae float on the glassy surface like cooked spinach, forming the base of a teeming food chain that has made the lake one of the best fishing destinations in the United States. It is also the last stop for more than 270 species of migratory birds on their way to the Caribbean and South America.

"The lake's probably in better shape than it's been in 10 years," said Harlan Griggs, who manages the marine center at the Roland Martin Marina in Clewiston and took third in last weekend's Xtreme Bass Fishing Series tournament.

The tournament's winner hauled in a nearly 28-pound catch - almost three times as much as last August's champ and almost twice as much as the 17-pound win in 2007.

"If you can catch 15, 16, 17 pounds of fish, you're doing good," Griggs said. "But when you start catching 20 or 25 pounds of fish, that's a testament."

During a recent visit to a swath of shallow lake marsh called Indian Prairie, hundreds of birds took off at the sound of an airboat, forming the only cloud in the sky - herons, ibises, egrets, the pink-feathered spoonbills and black-necked stilts. Sandpipers scooted across a crop of water lilies.

"For a couple years, this was bone dry," said Gray, stepping out of the boat to wade barefoot through the 6 inches of bathtub-temperature water.

Nearby, two small channels ran parallel into the distance - tire tracks from a truck that drove out here during the drought, when arsonists, at times, set fire to what is now lake bottom.

"It burned like crazy," Gray said.

Lake Okeechobee, the historic heart of the Everglades, once overflowed like a giant saucer to send broad sheets of water south into the giant marsh.

But like the rest of the Everglades, it teeters on the brink of collapse, thanks to 19th- and 20th-century efforts to open surrounding lands for farming and development.

After World War II, the Army Corps of Engineers straightened the Kissimmee River, which flows from the north, and finished walling off the lake behind the 140-mile Herbert Hoover Dike. Those projects turned Lake Okeechobee, which also serves as South Florida's backup water supply, into a polluted rain barrel.

Some call the lake Central Florida's toilet bowl. But unlike a toilet, it's impossible to flush. Phosphorus, an ingredient in manure and fertilizer that is the scourge of the Everglades ecosystem, now pours in from farms in huge quantities through the Kissimmee River.

So much phosphorus has accumulated that it would take centuries to eliminate it all at the current rate of removal.

Meanwhile, the same South Florida water managers in charge of cleaning the lake are consumed with another
mammoth task, Gov. Charlie Crist's $536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar, aimed at restoring Everglades to the south.

The greatest short-term threat to the lake is the wild fluctuation of its water levels.

After the busy hurricane season of 2004, which added 6 feet to the lake and sprung leaks in the dike, "everything you see here was gone," said Gray, pointing across Cody's Cove. "This was just open, dirty water."

Today, a reddish water fern called an azolla graces the lake's surface like a blush.

The corps strives to keep the lake's water levels lower today than it did in years past - between 12.5 and 15.5 feet above sea level - with the aim of protecting the Herbert Hoover Dike and the health of the lake.

Holding water levels within that range is "a lot to ask for the lake today," said Paul McCormick, the chief Lake Okeechobee scientist for the South Florida Water Management District.

Last fall, Tropical Storm Fay raised the lake 4 feet, making up more than half of the 7-foot plunge it had experienced during the 2007-08 drought.

When the lake gets too full, water stirs up sediments that block sunlight from reaching underwater vegetation, which quickly dies off. Even the shallowest parts of the lake were so murky after the 2004 hurricanes that Gray said he could not see his hand in 6 inches of water. When the lake rises, wading birds can't reach deep enough to snag fish.

Years of abnormally high water also eroded the aging dike, which now awaits $980 million in repairs that won't be coming any time soon.

Under the corps' newly preferred water levels, the lake will reach about 15.5 feet in January and recede over the course of the dry season to 12.5 feet in June. That's essentially what happened in the past year.

But the rain rarely cooperates so well.

"For years, it was just dirty - no plants, no chance of plants," Gray said. "The best news of all is that the lake is very resilient."

POTENTIAL LANDFILL SITE RAISING CONCERNS
08/15/2009
Sun Sentinel

Plans to build a landfill next to a treatment area that cleans water headed for the Everglades has already raised environmental alarm bells.

The prospect of buzzards - lured by landfill dining - create a potential hazard for helicopters and a new obstacle for Palm Beach County's long-stalled trash disposal plans.

Officials at the South Florida Water Management District this week announced they had serious concerns about one of the two competing sites under consideration for a new landfill. The site raising questions is 1,500 acres of farmland north of Southern Boulevard, near a stormwater treatment area that borders the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

The district manages the treatment area and uses helicopters to collect water samples for environmental testing. Helicopters and an influx of buzzards don't mix, according to the district.

"We do have a major concern," the district's Executive Director Carol Wehle said Thursday. "This is an extremely important issue for us."

The district's concerns "surprised" county Solid Waste Authority Executive Director Mark Hammond. The potential landfill sites have been under consideration since last fall and the stormwater treatment area is an almost 7,000-acre, man-made wetland teeming with birds.
"We believe we can operate a landfill safely and effectively next to the storm water treatment area," Hammond said.

Environmental concerns in 2007 stalled long-held plans to build a new landfill in sugar cane country on the west side of the national refuge.

Two alternative sites now under consideration west of Royal Palm Beach include the Hundley Farms land near the treatment area, as well as about 1,700 acres farther north at the northwest intersection of State Road 80 and U.S. 98.

Glades business leaders oppose putting a landfill at the S.R. 80-U.S. 98 intersection, the stretch of road they consider the gateway to their towns.

But environmental advocates are fighting the site next to the stormwater treatment area.

Putting a landfill so close to the treatment area threatens to "undermine" the effectiveness of the pollution-filtering marsh, said Jacquie Weisblum, of Audubon of Florida.

The authority estimates that long-term it would be about $137 million less expensive to acquire, develop and operate a landfill on the Hundley Farms site.

County commissioners since last fall have delayed deciding where to build the new landfill. They plan to take up the topic again in October.

The buzzard problem does not necessarily disqualify the location beside the treatment area as a site for a landfill, but it could trigger expensive efforts to limit the influx of big birds, Wehle said.

County officials are scheduled to meet with district representatives later this month to talk about potential land swaps for other alternative landfill sites.

The county's existing landfill west of West Palm Beach is projected to reach capacity by 2021. The plan was to get a new landfill opened by 2015.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

Copyright © 2009 Sun-Sentinel

---

FL U.S., Florida reach Everglades restoration deal
08/15/2009
Stateline.org
CURTIS MORGAN

After years of negotiations, water managers and the White House reached a deal that will finally have federal money flowing to Everglades projects.

Both sides hailed the contract as a major breakthrough that will move the joint restoration effort, which Congress approved in 2000, from talk to action.

AP FILE

Water managers and the White House signed a crucial contract Thursday that promises a much-needed infusion of federal dollars for the Everglades.

The agreement ends years of dispute over splitting up a ballooning restoration bill, which is expected to top $22 billion, and clears the way to quickly -- and finally -- begin long-stalled construction work.

The "master agreement" details how the South Florida Water Management District and the Army Corps of Engineers will share costs and duties for 68 projects Congress approved in 2000 to restore the natural flow of the River of Grass.

Both sides hailed the agreement -- reached when the Obama administration relented in a dispute over land values likely to shift as much as a half-billion dollars onto the federal ledger -- as a breakthrough that should move restoration from talk to action.
"This is not just a boring, silly administrative milestone," said Shannon Estenoz, a member of the water district's governing board. "This is the place where we pick up speed. I want to get out my boots and hard hat and start attending ground-breakings."

Terrence "Rock" Salt, a deputy assistant secretary of the Army who oversees the Corps, said construction could begin within months, starting with reclamation of 55,000 acres in the Picayune Strand, site of a Southwest Florida development that flopped decades ago. The Corps has $41 million in stimulus funding for that job.

"We now have the agreements in place that will support Everglades projects that were, only a decade ago, little more than hopes and dreams," said Salt, who signed the document for the White House.

Over the next two years, the Obama administration has budgeted or is seeking congressional approval for almost a half-billion dollars to begin restoration projects, including ones to restore freshwater flows to Biscayne Bay coastal wetlands, overhaul the C-111 canal to keep more water in Everglades National Park and build a reservoir to bolster Broward County's water supply and limit seepage from adjacent Everglades marshes.

Down the road, the agreement also could potentially open the door for federal help to complete Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial $536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. and convert them to massive reservoirs and pollution-treatment marshes.

In a court challenge, the Miccosukee Tribe and rival grower Florida Crystals Corp. have argued the land deal would delay cleanup, possibly by decades, because the district doesn't have money to build anything on the land. Estimates for conceptual designs range as high as $17 billion.

In past years, the Corps firmly opposed bankrolling projects primarily intended to clean up farm pollution, calling that a state responsibility. Both sides signaled that stance has been relaxed.

Salt said the Corps would decide whether to help pay for water-quality projects on a case-by-case basis, and he expected to discuss plans for the land with the district.

Board Chairman Eric Buermann said there already have been preliminary discussions about sharing costs for future projects. He also argued that the land deal would send a message to congressional critics of the so-far-sluggish restoration effort, underscoring Florida's commitment to getting the job done. "This is a state that is bellying up to the bar," he said.

The restoration plan calls for splitting costs 50-50, with the district covering its half with land purchases and the Corps footing most construction costs. But setting land value has proved to be a major source of friction.

The Corps normally values land a state contributes at market prices. But for the Everglades effort, the state initially agreed to use original, and often cheaper, purchase prices. With delays sending construction estimates soaring, water managers -- outspending the federal government six-to-one in the Glades -- pressed to change the terms.

White House budget managers, concerned about hundreds of millions of dollars added to federal costs, balked. But take-it-or-leave-it letters the district board sent to the White House last month sparked a flurry of high-level negotiations, with the Corps agreeing to calculate land at market prices for most projects.