

**Report on the South Florida Water Management District's
July 28th Water Resources Advisory Commission Lake Okeechobee Committee Meeting**

The meeting was held at the District office in Okeechobee. Southwest Floridians who attended included WRAC member Beverly Grady, Lee County Director of Natural Resources Roland Ottolini, Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau Beach & Shoreline Project Manager Tamara Piggott, and me. This was the second official meeting of the committee, and it was chaired by Governing Board member Bubba Wade.

The United Waterfowlers of Florida distributed a one page list of recommendations to the committee ([see attached](#)). I think it would be a good idea for the Southwest Florida Watershed Council to review the recommendations and issue a similar document that notes our recommendations. I'm hearing an increasing level of comment that the committee should address water management and land use policies if it is going to add any value to the efforts underway by the staff of the South Florida Water Management District and other agencies working to restore health to the Lake.

Technical summaries were presented on the following topics:

- ◆ Public Records/Sunshine Law (Frank Bartalone)
- ◆ Lake Status System Operations (Bob Howard)
 - District-wide, rainfall in June was 180% of average.
 - To date, July rainfall has been 93% of average.
 - The Lake level at the time of our meeting was 16.32 feet, and is continuing to drop. When it reaches 16.25 feet, the District hopes to reduce discharges to the estuaries (if the forecast calls for additional rain that will increase the Lake level, a reduction in discharges may not occur).
 - Conditions in both estuaries are poor.
- ◆ Lake Okeechobee Status and Program Activities (Susan Gray)
 - The algae bloom in the Lake had been clearing, but it is now again a significant bloom.
 - The Lake is 4 feet higher now than it was at this time last year.
 - Lake level management strategies remain unchanged: achieving a level of 12 feet for twelve weeks starting April 15, 2006 is still the goal. We looked at November, 2005 position analyses for three scenarios (if we exit the rainy season with a relatively low Lake level, at the current level, and at the median level) – it seems optimistic to me to think that a level of 12 feet will be possible in April of next year, given the current Lake stage and precipitation forecasts.
 - The US Army Corps of Engineers has announced that it is beginning preparation of a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule Study. This appears to me to be our best opportunity to influence the policy regarding Lake levels. No time frame for the DSEIS was given, but the Corps is seeking letters of comment and inquiry. See the [attached document](#) for additional information.
- ◆ CERP Lake Okeechobee Watershed Projects Update (David Unsell)
 - We spent a great deal of time on this topic, and when all was said and done, the conclusions were:
 - because land prices have risen so much in recent years, the cost estimates in the Yellow Book are way out of line,

- the final 10 watershed alternatives at this point do not bear a strong resemblance to the projects specified in the Yellow Book,
 - total storage specified in the Yellow Book amounts to 7 inches off the Lake level – insignificant in the scheme of things,
 - the bulk of storage needed to help restore the Lake to health will come from ASR (the Yellow Book calls for 2 million acre feet of storage, and ASR represents 1.5 million acre feet), and the Adaptive Management and Planning Process will be the tool used if ASR proves to be ineffective for storage, and
 - we have an opportunity to look beyond the Yellow Book.
 - The committee was asked to endorse the components of the Lake Okeechobee Accelerated Project (this project is already underway). Several people had questions about the Forward Pumps that are part of the project, and given statements made during the meeting that the pumps would ensure water supply to agricultural and urban water users, I asked that they also be used to provide deliveries of water to the estuaries and included in the Recovery and Prevention Strategy for Caloosahatchee MFLs (my comment and request were acknowledged, but not affirmed by anyone).
- ◆ Kissimmee Upper Basin Outflow Analysis (David Anderson)
 - Runoff from the UKB does not show a trend for Water Years 1935 to 2004.
 - Runoff is influenced by rainfall.
 - Analysis does not indicate a change in the relationship of runoff from the UKB to rainfall for Water Years 1965 to 2004.
 - We did not receive (we had not asked for it) an analysis of land use changes in the UKB, although there was consensus that the land has been converted to urban and suburban uses.
- ◆ Vegetation Management and Control in Lake Okeechobee (Mike Bodle)
 - Since 2000, 23,694 acres of torpedograss have been treated and 6,553 acres of cattail have been treated.
 - The management of exotic vegetation is, and will be, an ongoing operation.
- ◆ Technical Sub-Committee Organization and Meeting Schedule
 - Mike Collins is organizing this group, whose charge is: within 90 days, produce a factual, science-based report for general audiences, describing the historic and current hydrology of lake O and its tributary drainage basins.
 - Confirmed participants include:
 - Sean Sculley and Cal Neidrauer from the SFWMD
 - Thomas Lodge, Tom MacVicar, and Robert Miller from private consulting firms
 - Invited participants include representatives of the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes, as well as State agencies.
 - Ernie Estevez was asked to consider participating, but declined since his area of expertise is estuaries. There was discussion about the importance of including the estuaries in the report, but there was not agreement that estuaries should be considered a component of the report. Bubba suggested that it would be appropriate to invite estuarine specialists to provide input as the original group finishes its work.