Bill Nelson comes to Fort Myers to talk about water woes: toxic algae and Lake O releases

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Same place. Same faces. Worse problem.

Almost two years ago to the day, Sen. Bill Nelson sat overlooking the Caloosahatchee, offering his thoughts on the water catastrophe then gripping the southern part of the state to many of the same bureaucrats, elected officials and advocates who filled a meeting room at the Fort Myers City Pier building Thursday.

It was the Orlando Democrat's first stop on a trip across the state to talk water quality with residents and officials, much as he'd done in 2016.

The difference then, though, was that the St. Lucie River on Florida’s east coast was dealing with a much worse case of slime than the Caloosahatchee was. This year the Caloosahatchee has caught the brunt of the toxic blue-green algae bloom.

Water managers use both rivers to carry off dark polluted water from Lake Okeechobee when its levels get high enough to threaten the safety of residents living below the aging Herbert Hoover Dike.
Another difference is that in 2016, Gov. Rick Scott had declared an algae emergency and the South Florida Water Management District was using $2.6 million to deal with the problem. No such measures have been announced this year, despite Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen's Thursday letter to Scott, asking him to declare one.

"Please accept this urgent request for a state of emergency announcement in the Lee County area as a result of red tide and blue-green algae in the Caloosahatchee River and along the Southwest Florida coast," she wrote. "We must warn our residents and unsuspecting tourists of the potential risks ... during this outbreak."

Scott's Press Secretary Ashley Cook wrote in an email, "The Governor will never stop fighting to ensure that these communities have the clean water they deserve."

Nelson is facing a tough November election opponent in Scott. Polls have been showing the two neck-and-neck.

As he did 2016, the 18-year senator pointed to the environmentally disastrous results of plumbing the two rivers for flood control with no regard for the state’s historic natural systems.
Senator Nelson talks river problems, solutions with water advocates in Fort Myers

And as then, Nelson promised to help spearhead fixes for the crisis. "Its solution is either quit dumping so much water from Lake Okeechobee," he said, "or clean what comes out of it."

Though several projects to help with those goals are in the works, none of them will be ready to help this year. Two reservoirs are planned to store extra water, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working to repair Lake O's dike so water managers won't need to keep levels low to avoid a breach.

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"We’ve speeded up projects; the big reservoir won’t be ready until 2020," Nelson said. "And we have said (to the Corps), "You’ve got to speed up the construction of the dike … so that the strengthened dike can hold more water, so you don’t have to release it at times like these."

Nelson said he's expecting the Corps of Engineers "any day" to announce an accelerated completion schedule.

"We are waiting for the Corps of Engineers to come out and approve the accelerated plan for the finishing of the dike around Lake Okeechobee (as well as) the reservoir to the south of the lake, which will be a joint state/federal project so we can get them incorporated in the water bill." He's referring to the The Water Resources Development Act, a federal bill that includes many water projects, which is coming up for a vote soon.

Scott's team defended his leadership on dike repairs and criticized Nelson's record in an email that read, in part, "In April 2017, I announced my goal of fixing the Herbert Hoover Dike by 2022, and I’m glad to see that Bill Nelson finally supports my plan — even after he voted against this very funding in January."

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson met with water advocates and elected officials at the Fort Myers City Pier to talk about the algae bloom on the Caloosahatchee River. On the left is Rae Ann Wessel, who is the natural resource policy director at Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation, Jennifer Hecker is the executive director of the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program, center, and Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann is on the right. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)


After he spoke, Nelson gave the assembled bureaucrats, elected officials, would-be politicians, water advocates and residents a chance to talk. "Let me hear what you all think. Anything that you need to know?"

Calusa Waterkeeper John Cassani said: "We’ve never had an event like this before. This is a historic algae bloom, and I've worked on the river for 40 years, and I've never seen anything like this. So we're in a little bit of shock mode right now."
Recreational diver Kristina Jackson told Nelson she fears the plague has moved offshore. After a recent diving trip 20 miles out in the Gulf, which she said was filled with green muck, she came back with a leg infection doctors are still treating.

Algae builds up at the Fort Myers Yacht Basin on Thursday. Recent algae blooms are starting to move west down the Caloosahatchee River. U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson met with water advocates and elected officials to discuss the water quality. (Photo: Andrew West/The News-Press)

And while she said she's sensitive to the region's tourism industry, Jackson thinks more awareness of the problem is sorely needed. "But how do we notify the public without scaring them?" she asked.

Nelson told her he'd assembled a group of medical professionals in Stuart later that day to discuss such health issues. First, though, he was headed to Belle Glade, on the southeast shore of Lake O., to talk about funding dike repair.

"The overall solution is to put less nutrients in the river," he said, "including less nutrients into Lake Okeechobee. That takes time."

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