More water set aside for Caloosahatchee during season

The state on Thursday approved a new threshold for freshwater releases in the Caloosahatchee River, but critics say the new rule will not provide enough water during dry times.

South Florida Water Management District governing board members voted unanimously to pass a new minimum flow for the Caloosahatchee that raises the amount of water that must flow through the Franklin Lock and Dam near Alva from 300 cubic feet per second to 400 cubic feet per second.

That can mean more water for the river during dry times, but many at the meeting said nearly twice that much water is needed to keep the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary in balance.

"Certainly the estuarine research and real-time monitoring would indicate that 400 (cubic feet per second) is not sufficient downstream salinity levels, and really it’s more like 720," Sanibel Mayor Kevin Ruane said.


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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducts Lake Okeechobee releases, with input from the district.

The state sets minimum flow levels to determine the point at which further water permit allocations would damage the downstream ecosystem.

"They’re not flows that are designed to restore the environment, and they’re not optimum flows that are needed for the estuary itself," district scientist Don Medellin said.
Fishing is also popular along the banks of the river. The Franklin Lock beach, which may close for good, was empty Saturday, after recommended due to high bacterial levels were posted and weather was cool. This beach and waterway is a popular spot in the south Olga beach area on the Caloosahatchee. (Photo: Andrea Melendez/The News-Press)

Measurements are taken at the Franklin Lock because that's where the estuary and the freshwater, upstream portions o

The original minimum flow rule for the Caloosahatchee was established in 2001.

Several other mayors from Southwest Florida spoke at the meeting.

Some asked the district to better manage the Caloosahatchee River in general, citing conditions this summer that have |

"In my 39 years as a resident of Fort Myers, this past summer has been the most challenging on the effects of our qualit Fort Myers Mayor Randy Henderson said. "It's been dire. It's having a substantial economic impact on us, our citizens a

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Lee County is at the cross-hairs of a blue-green algae bloom in the Caloosahatchee River and a red tide bloom along th

Many people here blame Lake Okeechobee for the issues.
"The runoff and the septic tank leakage is not an issue," Cape Coral Mayor Joe Coviello said. "We don't have problems have serious problems in our saltwater canals, and those problems don’t start until we get the massive releases of water from Okeechobee."

The blue-green algae bloom first started on Okeechobee in June, and then it showed up in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

Governing board member Jaime Weisinger, who represents Southwest Florida, said the district needs to move forward and be established by the time the Caloosahatchee River reservoir is operational in 2022.

"I don’t think we can put this off," Weisinger said. "We've got an opportunity to move these numbers forward and make sure that the levels will be established by the time the Caloosahatchee River reservoir is operational in 2022."

Board member Daniel O'Keefe said the minimum flow rule should be flexible and that it can be adapted to conditions if needed.

"This should be subject to updated data and more current criteria that matches what's really going on on the ground today: happen now that probably didn't model out," O'Keefe said. "I want us to stay on top of this, and if it's determined that a different (minimum flow level) is needed, then we take that back up and we look at it."

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