



THE NEWS-PRESS VIEWS

Tell us what you think. Include your name, address and daytime phone number. Letters must be 200 words or less. Op-ed pieces must be 600 words or less and include your photo. All submissions will be verified and may be edited. **Email:** mailbag@news-press.com **Phone:** 239-335-0390

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Editorial



DOUG MACGREGOR

ENVIRONMENTALISTS WEIGH IN ON WATER

When the quality of the state's water – from the Everglades to the Kissimmee, from the Caloosahatchee to the St. Lucie rivers, from the smallest canal to the massiveness of Lake Okechobee – is the subject, there is plenty of passion, opinions, science and facts to be shared. The result has often been the creation of environmental battlegrounds as well as common ground – much of it between government, business, land owners and environmentalists.

A week ago in the Views section, and ahead of Wednesday's important and solution-driven The News-Press Market Watch Save Our Water summit at the Sanibel Harbor Marriott Resort and Spa, we heard from Malcolm "Bubba" Wade Jr., the senior vice president for U.S. Sugar, who wrote about how activists have turned "their focus away from solu-

tions and toward attacking Florida's farmers and calling for the purchase of more of their land." He told of the efforts of U.S. Sugar and farmers to reduce the phosphorous water flowing from farm lands into waterways by 55 percent. He wrote on the importance of farm jobs and food production. We heard from Mitch Hutchcraft, a member of the South Florida Water Management District, which uses our taxpayer dollars to manage water. He talked of the need to complete for water storage, especially north of the lake, and the district's commitment to finishing current projects, like the Caloosahatchee reservoir.

Today, we hear from the environmentalists and activists, focusing on the scientific and water watchdog roles they play in preserving our water treasures.

See Editorial, Page 32A



Live coverage of the event at news-press.com

Twitter: Join the conversation using #saveourwater

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Special page: newspr.es/SaveOurWater

Lineup of speakers: newspr.es/SOW

COMMENTARY

Looking ahead and seeking new board members



Cindy McCurry-Ross
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

We are heading into the homestretch of this year, which means that amid the election and post-Hurricane Matthew coverage, the newsroom and the editorial board are planning for 2017.

This time last year, I asked for your feedback on the most pressing issues facing the community, and we used your comments to help shape our 2016 board agenda.

On the list: Violence in our community, especially among young people, and its root causes, including poverty and poor education; the lack of accessible and affordable mental health care and Election 2016, of course.

At the time, our leadership team had discussed water quality and the ever-important state of our environment. These have been key issues on the editorial board priority list for many years. We live in paradise and we want to keep it that way.

We didn't know then, however, that we would have one of the wettest winters ever, that the Caloosahatchee

would be running hard with a torrent of brown water and that Mother Nature would stir up a political muck-fest.

Water quality rose to the top of the priority list.

This agenda – stopping the violence, advocating for better mental health care, vetting candidates, and seeking solutions to our water crisis – guides where the editorial board spends its time and attention.

Because of our commitment to a deeper understanding of mental health issues, I am emceeing "Food for Thought, Mental Health Educational Symposium" presented by Hope Clubhouse at lunchtime on Monday. I toured Hope Clubhouse in Fort Myers recently and was inspired by what I saw: A supportive, safe place for adults with mental illness.

You've seen on these Views pages our commitment to spelling out many perspectives on our water issues. We'll bring those perspectives to life at our Save Our Water Summit, scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. It's sold out, but if you didn't get a ticket, follow our coverage at news-press.com.

We reach a huge audience, so when we focus attention on these issues, we broadcast a variety of perspectives and amplify many ideas for solutions. Hopefully, we inspire you to learn

If you go

What: Hope Clubhouse "Food for Thought. Mind, Body and Soul. Mental Health Educational Symposium"

When: Monday. Registration - 10:30 a.m. Program - 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

Where: Broadway Palm, 1380 Colonial Blvd., Fort Myers

Cost: \$50 per person includes lunch buffet; sponsor a Hope Clubhouse member for \$50.

Keynote speaker: Dottie Pacharis, advocate and author

Panelists: Judge H. Andrew Swett, Cindy Bishop, Dr. Omar Rieche. Emcee: Cindy McCurry-Ross

RSVP: 239-267-1777 or HopeClubhouse.org

enough to draw your own conclusions or get involved in a personal way or to take action on public policy.

Now it's time for you to speak up about our 2017 agenda. What are our most troublesome community issues? We won't abandon our 2016 issues; they certainly aren't solved with a year's worth of attention. But are there other community matters that need our attention, too?

What are they? Children's issues?

Affordable housing? Jobs and wages? Economic diversity?

Send your thoughts about the most pressing issues to mailbag@news-press.com with "Community Agenda 2017" in the subject line.

And if you are truly motivated to get involved, consider applying for a citizen member's seat on our editorial board. The five current citizen members have served us well, committing dozens of hours as we vetted more than 25 candidates in endorsement interviews. They will cycle off the board at year's end.

The next set of board members will be asked to commit at least an hour every other week.

Email a resume and cover letter explaining your interest and why you would be a good board member Senior Engagement Editor Tom Hayden at thayden@news-press.com. Please put "Citizen Member Application" in the subject line.

The most rewarding part of what we do is rallying people to pull together in pursuit of making our community at better place. Here's to hoping you'll do your part.

Cindy McCurry-Ross is executive editor of The News-Press.



Editorial

Continued from Page 31A



Kimberly Mitchell: Everglades Trust

Historically, the Everglades used to cover most of South Florida, stretching from Orlando to the Florida Keys. Water from the Kissimmee would fill Lake Okeechobee and flow south into the River of Grass. This is no longer what the Everglades looks like.

Today, water can no longer freely flow south from Lake Okeechobee, and the Everglades Agricultural Area, owned mostly by subsidized sugar companies, sits right where the River of Grass used to begin. The water in Lake Okeechobee has been contaminated with all kinds of nutrients from agricultural fertilizers, so much that the water in the Lake is considered too polluted to be sent directly to the Everglades.

Instead, we hold this polluted water in Lake Okeechobee until the water levels become so high that billions of gallons of polluted water must be dumped down the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and out into the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

Meanwhile, the Everglades is desperate for clean freshwater. Everglades National Park receives less than half of the water it once did, and what's left of the historic River of Grass will run dry if it doesn't get more water soon — jeopardizing the source of drinking water for 8 million Floridians.

These are facts supported by more than 200 independent scientists.

In 2000, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and President Bill Clinton signed into law an ambitious and vital master plan to restore the Everglades — the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Consisting of 68 projects, its most important piece was, and still is, conveyance, storage and treatment of massive amounts of freshwater south of the Lake.

All stakeholders were at the table, including Big Sugar. But as the clock has ticked and the time has drawn closer, Big Sugar rears its head in opposition to the one project that would have the most dramatic effect on the environmental and economic damage we're witnessing today — the EAA Reservoir Project.

Four disasters, one solution. Buy the land, send clean water south.

In his opinion piece in The News-Press, Bubba Wade, a senior executive at U.S. Sugar, appears to take issue with “sound bites.” Fortunately for those who care about solving the problem, these simple words convey the message perfectly. And they are backed-up by real science.

Big Sugar claims to support CERP, but at the same time opposes the largest storage reservoir project in the plan. The cost of the project pales in comparison to the cost of inaction. Tourism, real estate values, recreational fishing, and many other impacted industries will continue to suffer economic and ecological consequences so long as the status quo remains.

No other private group has been more responsible for the pollution than Big Sugar. The public has spent billions of taxpayer dollars cleaning up its mess over 22 years. Their financial contribution does not come anywhere close to covering the cost to clean up the pollution they generated. Not only is it fair for Big Sugar to pay for it, it is mandated by the Florida Constitution.

There is a dire need to redirect the flow of water in South Florida. This is not an attack on farmers. It is reality. Simply put, you cannot solve this problem without the EAA Reservoir. You cannot build a project without land.

Kimberly Mitchell is the executive director of Everglades Trust. She is a former West Palm Beach City Commissioner serving from 2002-2015.



Nicole Johnson: Conservancy of Southwest Florida

The conservancy is dedicated to protecting Southwest Florida's water

resources. Abundant, clean water is the foundation of our region's environment, quality of life, and economy. To promote better water management, the Conservancy works with stakeholders and decision-makers to ensure that appropriately protective water policy regulations are in place and utilized.

The public plays a significant role in advocating with us for clean water solutions. By attending the Save Our Water Summit, presented by The News-Press, the community will gain a better understanding of the water crisis, the ripple effect on our economy and the proposed solutions. The idea for a collaborative, educational forum was born during an editorial board meeting and discussions about the Lake Okeechobee crisis between Conservancy of Southwest Florida President and CEO Rob Moher and The News-Press' President Mike Jung, and the Conservancy is proud to be a sponsor.

No matter our various perspectives, we can all agree our very existence depends on water. With so many pressures facing our water in the same space and at the same time, the time to act is now. The Water Summit comes at a critical time in the conversation about our water quality and therefore the quality of life in Southwest Florida.

The Caloosahatchee was connected years ago to Lake Okeechobee through an artificial dredged canal in order to divert water previously flowing south of the Lake to the Everglades. This was done to create the Everglades Agricultural Area, an area of the former Everglades that was drained to be used for large-scale sugar cane production by agribusinesses.

Being constrained to a few small canals instead of the former large flow way south of the lake, when lake levels get too deep, water has to be discharged east to the St. Lucie and west to the Caloosahatchee River, instead of flowing south as it historically had.

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida continues to advocate for a comprehensive approach to restoring clean appropriate water flows to the Caloosahatchee and the Everglades. We advocate for science-based solutions that would benefit the environment and the public health and safety of all the communities in South Florida. To fix this water crisis, we have called for officials to complete current Everglades restoration projects; acquire more uninhabited land in the Everglades Agricultural Area to provide additional water storage, treatment, and conveyance south of Lake Okeechobee; retain and treat more water within the Caloosahatchee watershed; protect remaining natural wetlands and flow ways in order to maintain existing natural storage and treatment; and to control pollution at its source.

We are grateful for the opportunity to bring people together to share information and propose solutions. On behalf of the Conservancy, we are hopeful that the outcome of The News-Press Save our Water Summit is a more informed, engaged and empowered constituency when it comes to decisions impacting our most valuable natural resource, water.

To learn more about the Conservancy of Southwest Florida's work, visit conservancy.org

Nicole Johnson is director of environmental policy for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.



Cris Costello: Sierra Club

For those of us who have been watching closely, the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board's goal has not been to inform the public, but rather to distract and deceive us in order to avoid working on the project most critical to improving water quality in the Caloosahatchee: the storage, treatment and conveyance of water south, through the Everglades Agricultural Area to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.

In Mitch Hutchcraft's recent opinion piece, he tossed out a number of projects including the C-43, Lake Hicpochee, dispersed water management, and storage and treatment north of Lake Okeechobee. What he neglected to point out is that the C-43 project, the primary purpose of which is to capture local runoff, is not going to provide a significant reduction in the number and volume of harmful discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the estuary.

He also left out the incontrovertible scientific fact that all storage is not created equal; especially when we are talking about the storage that is needed

to reduce the harmful discharges from Lake Okeechobee. Modeling shows that, when added to the current system, storage north of Lake Okeechobee will have a negligible impact (6 percent) on the harmful discharges from Lake Okeechobee; while a reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee would reduce the volume of discharges between 45-49 percent.

Hutchcraft's remarks mirror the district's recent endeavors to dance around, deflect attention from, and ultimately delay addressing the major problem: the historic flow of water southward from Lake Okeechobee through what is now the EAA is being shunted through the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and will continue to be sent east and west until water can instead be sent south.

This delay flies in the face of the Legacy Florida bill signed by the governor this spring. Legacy Florida requires agencies to prioritize projects that will reduce harmful discharges to the estuaries. We cannot allow the district to claim that as long as there is any reduction, it will be in compliance with the law, especially when there is a project that provides much greater benefits than any other — the EAA Reservoir project proposed by Sen. Joe Negron. An EAA Reservoir has been a CERP project since 2000; it is not a new idea and is long past due.

There is no legitimate excuse to delay the planning for this reservoir; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is ready to proceed but the district is balking. Why? What we know is that for months now the district has used its public relations arm to parrot the U.S. Sugar Corporation's talking points against the project through its misnamed “Get the Facts” email series.

The tactics only serve to motivate those of us intent on getting justice for the South Florida residents who have endured the harmful algae, the collapsed ecosystems, and the lost property values, quality of life and jobs. Until there is a reservoir in the EAA, where excess water in Lake Okeechobee can be sent on its eventual way to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, the discharges will continue to inundate the coastal communities.

Cris Costello is the senior regional organizing representative for the Sierra Club.



Gene Gibson: Riverwatch

The proposed C-43 West Basin storage project calls for constructing an above-ground, water reservoir that would cover 14 square miles in western Hendry County at a cost of more than \$600 million. As conceived, the C-43 reservoir would capture a fraction of runoff flowing down the Caloosahatchee River during the summer wet season and hold this water for release during the winter and spring dry season to help moderate estuary salinity. Maintaining salinity balance in both the wet and dry seasons is essential to a healthy estuary ecosystem that can support sea grasses, oysters, fish and other wildlife.

When first proposed, the C-43 reservoir seemed like a good idea. But, since 2005, observers, including Riverwatch, have voiced concerns, to little or no avail, about the C-43 reservoir design and its potential performance (see *All the Facts: C-43 Reservoir* crca.caloosahatchee.org). A perfect storm of poor project planning, the problems include:

» The current design lacks a water quality component. When the weather warms, the C-43 reservoir will become an incubator for harmful algae blooms (HABs), more commonly known as blue/green algae. HABs cause health and environmental dangers and can adversely impact tourism and home values.

» The current design poses a safety issue. National and State Government Agencies rate the reservoir as having a high hazard potential owing to most of the reservoir sitting above ground level. Think berm or dike failure, similar to the concerns associated with Lake Okeechobee and the Herbert Hoover Dike.

» The costs outweigh the benefits. Riverwatch believes that implementing environmental regulatory reform would cost less than expensive infrastructure projects paid for by taxpayers. Some officials, however, may find the political pain of vigorously enforcing effective, common-sense regulations too costly.

» State government agencies and politicians are reluctant to admit they

are wrong. Their design decisions are based on flawed modeling that lacks current, science-based, data. This enables officials to avoid making hard political decisions — especially ones opposed by powerful interests that compete for limited water supplies.

A better solution: Riverwatch supports professor William Mitsch's proposal for an accelerated planning and funding process for a storage/treatment area in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), along with additional planned storage and treatment features north of Lake Okeechobee. Furthermore, a redesigned, shallower C-43 reservoir would include a water treatment component and could cost less. The Mitsch plan comports with Senator Joe Negron's plan that also calls for a storage/treatment area in the EAA.

Gene Gibson is vice-president of the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association (Riverwatch), a Waterkeeper Alliance Affiliate.



Rae Ann Wessel: Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation

Imagine the difference between drinking from a water fountain versus a fire hose at full capacity. Now imagine that after you are knocked down and pushed backward by the force of the water from the fire hose, the pressure continues for 274 consecutive days and counting! Imagine struggling but being unable to recover your balance for nine months. Pretty soon you'd run out of energy trying to regain your balance, realizing that you couldn't continue to fight the pressure. This is the Caloosahatchee estuary struggle.

Excessive rainfall in January 2016 from a strong El Nino weather event deluged the entire Everglades ecosystem resulting in the Caloosahatchee receiving harmful freshwater discharges for the past nine consecutive months and it is still coming.

These blasts of freshwater reduce salinities endangering the commercial and recreational fish, bait fish, shrimp, shellfish and blue crab that use the estuary as their nursery. The dark, murky water carries massive loads of muck sediments that prevent sunlight from reaching seagrass limiting their growth and ability to absorb pollutants and produce oxygen for the estuarine food chain. Oyster beds in the lower estuary at Iona are dead due to prolonged low salinities so are no longer able to filter and clean water.

The Caloosahatchee's water problems are not limited to this unusual year. In the past 25 years, the estuary has yo-yo'd between harmful extremes of too much and not enough water more frequently, compounding problems and limiting the ability of natural systems to recover.

To stop this destructive cycle we need to restore the Everglades and estuary ecosystem's natural healthy balance of diversity, productivity and resiliency.

How do we do that? With less than half of the original Everglades remaining, managing water and creating additional water storage throughout the greater Everglades north, south, west and east is essential. But not all storage is equal.

Some are promoting an idea that water storage and disposal north of the lake can eliminate the need to build additional storage south of the lake. Deep well injection is suggested as a cheap way to dispose of excess freshwater deep underground into the “boulder zone.” Besides the cost of construction and operation, that freshwater is lost forever and not available to meet water needs during dry seasons and drought. This is not only bad public policy, our states explosive growth has a documented increasing demand for freshwater for municipal, agriculture and natural system needs

We support increasing storage north of the lake but capacity is limited. Everglades restoration cannot be achieved without additional storage, treatment and conveyance south. Rain that falls in the lake, in the lake's watershed and south of the lake will not be pumped uphill to be stored north of the lake. Additional storage south of the lake will reduce pressure on the dike, protecting communities south of the lake, will protect the lake ecosystem and reduce estuary discharges while also providing additional water supply for agriculture in the EAA and the Everglades.

Rae Ann Wessel is Natural Resources Policy Director for the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.