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Florida rivers getting sicker, Sentinel investigation finds (CALOOSAHATCHEE)

By Kevin Spears

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-fla-rivers-day1-decline-20121215,0,5549875.story>

The Caloosahatchee River has been so badly treated in so many ways and for so long that it's a frontrunner for the shameful title of most-abused river in Florida.

The river, in southwest Florida near Fort Myers, is repeatedly hammered by one-two punches — unnatural water releases from dams and polluted runoff from as far away as Orlando.

It has much in common with the St. Lucie River, another disaster, in that both serve as huge drain pipes for South Florida's increasingly dirty Lake Okeechobee. That lake, the state's biggest by far, is held in place by an aging and weakening embankment of dirt and rock known as the Herbert Hoover Dike.

The big lake is an important water supply, so its managers want to keep it as full as possible — but not too full, because they fear high water might breach the dike.

So at the first sign of the lake filling up, floodgates are opened, sending torrents of water east into a canal that leads to the St. Lucie and past Stuart to the Atlantic Ocean — and west into the Caloosahatchee, past Fort Myers to San Carlos Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

All that water is lethal in a couple of ways, contaminated with fertilizers, nitrogen and phosphorus pollution from urban runoff and agricultural operations and from sludge that's generated by municipal sewage plants and then spread on fields that eventually drain into the lake. The sudden floods of freshwater also wipe out the seagrasses, oysters and other marine life that depend on the moderately salty environments of coastal estuaries.

The reverse also occurs: During dry weather, the floodgates are closed, diverting lake water to sugar-cane farmers. With the freshwater flow pinched off, the lower portion of the Caloosahatchee stagnates, turns too salty and breeds algae blooms.

A little history lesson here: The St. Lucie was not connected to Lake Okeechobee before the arrival of steam shovels and farmers, and the Caloosahatchee historically had been connected through a series of wetlands, marshes and other lakes.

Before the Herbert Hoover Dike was built, Lake Okeechobee would spill its high waters in a gentle, sheet flow south to the Everglades and into the wetlands that gently fed water into the headwaters of Caloosahatchee.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which historically viewed Florida's natural rivers as enemies of prosperity, recarved the meandering, shallow Caloosahatchee into a beast of a canal a quarter-mile wide, 25 feet deep and interrupted with three dams.

Earlier this year, three environmental groups filed suit against the Corps of Engineers, blaming it for an increasingly sick Caloosahatchee. The river has had severe outbreaks toxic algae for most of the past decade, forcing health authorities to post parts of the river with “STAY OUT OF WATER” signs.

Rae Ann Wessel, policy director of the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation, said the Caloosahatchee River has been consciously sacrificed to benefit cities and farmers that need a place to dump dirty runoff but also want to draw on its waters during drought. Until the river is treated more equitably, Wessel said, it has little chance of recovery.

“We have a definite trend toward degrading water quality,” she said.

— Kevin Spear