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Joseph Gilio: My plan for halting Lake Okeechobee discharges to the estuaries



Water from Lake Okeechobee is released June 16 into the C-44 Canal, which leads to the St. Lucie River, at the St. Lucie Lock and Dam near Stuart. (LEAH VOSS/TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS)

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By Joseph Gilio

Timing is everything.

I was boating the St. Lucie Inlet when the volume of 2016 discharges from Lake Okeechobee equaled the "Lost Summer" of 2013.

The discharges 4 miles from shore were spreading north, contaminating much larger portions of the Atlantic Ocean than ever reported.

I predict the discharges will continue into 2017.

In 1985, I suggested to the South Florida Water Management District that phosphorus levels in Lake Okeechobee's water would not be reduced by spending tens of millions of our dollars to move dairy farms away from the lake edge. I stated the overwhelming need for improving the lake's water quality was to demuck — remove the sediment/muck — from the lake's bottom to reduce its legacy load of phosphorus.

This legacy pollutant is a thousand times more abundant than amounts from dairy farms. Dairies were moved — not a bad idea in itself — and millions spent. But the lake's water phosphate levels remained unchanged. We got little benefit from the district spending our tax dollars.

Timing is everything.

In 2002, the South Florida Water Management District finally contracted a study to address the demuck issue. Five recommendations were:

1. Demuck to man-made islands

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- within lake at a cost of \$3.5 billion
2. Demuck from the deep lake bottom to lake shore as littoral zones at a cost of \$3.1 billion
 3. Demuck to an off-site location outside the lake's drainage area at a cost of \$3.37 billion
 4. Add a toxic chemical to settle phosphorous to the lake bottom at a cost of \$500 million
 5. Do nothing

The report recommended doing nothing. It stated Lake Okeechobee's water would self clean to 40 parts per billion total phosphorus by 2015.

There was no improvement in lake water quality.

As I predicted, the lake's average in 2015 was unchanged at 120 parts per billion total phosphorous.

Only demucking, followed by regrowth of existing underwater grasses over the cleared lake bottom, will bring lake phosphorous levels low enough that less Everglades Agricultural Area land will be needed to move massive volumes of water south. My work at St. Lucie West's lakes strongly indicates that success.

Timing is everything.

Recently, I presented my proposal, called Plan G, to the Society of Wetland

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How's the water? | Map updated July 18

Scientists. Plan G's synergistic elements include:

1. Fund the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, except deep-well injections (about \$15 billion)
2. Fund the Central Everglades Planning Project (\$1.9 billion)

Together, these projects will decrease Lake Okeechobee discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers by 21 percent.

Plan G reduces the remaining 79 percent of discharges to the St. Lucie to zero, restores the natural flow to the Caloosahatchee, the Okeechobee Waterway and full south flow to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

Plan G calls for:

1. Finishing filling the C-37 Canal to the original Kissimmee oxbows
2. Demucking Lake Okeechobee to an off-site location
3. Building a slotted weir in the new, hardened lake dike up to 7 miles in length adjacent to newly acquired EAA land at the south end of the lake, and bridge State Road 80 over the weir.
4. Buy 70,000 acres adjacent to the weir and create a flowing, storing, treating "restored" Everglades —

- not a reservoir
5. Restore the Holey and Rotenberger state tracts (63,000 acres) to Everglades marshes
 6. Use existing 50,000 acres of stormwater treatment areas to meet 10 parts per billion phosphorous maximum for waters entering the remnant Everglades, and complete bridging Tamiami Trail

Plan G retains 80 percent of the existing Everglades Agricultural Area. It eliminates costly building and maintenance of leaky reservoirs and maximizes soft engineering duplicating nature.

Plan G is a necessary add-on to completion of the Central Everglades Planning Project and the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

Together, these projects would stop river discharges and increase lake water flow south. Plan G would cost \$5-9 billion, in addition to the \$17 billion estimated for CERP and CEPP.

Plan G's time is now.

Joseph Gilio is a wetland scientist, former founder and president of Wetlands Management Inc., who lives in Palm City. His website is www.joegilio.com.



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