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STORM SEASON WATER QUALITY OUTLOOK IN SOUTH FLORIDA

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By: Sidney C. Bigham, III

In May of 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis expressed concerns about water levels at Lake Okeechobee, stating that: “with the lake at the level it is now, we're really concerned and bracing for the Corps to discharge. And that's not, we think, the way we want to go forward." With the onset of the wet season and what could be an active hurricane season this year, the Governor and some lawmakers are urging the Army Corps not to discharge Lake Okeechobee to canals and rivers to the east and west, but to send the water south to the Everglades. The reason is simple: toxic algae bloom in the waters of Lake Okeechobee, spurred on by the summer heat, threatens to impact residents and tourists who use south Florida waterways for business and recreation.

On the other side of the fence, sending Lake Okeechobee discharges south could negatively impact the agriculture industry. The Army Corps is in the process of developing a new operating plan for Lake Okeechobee, called the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual or LOSOM. The LOSOM stands in place for a long time, as significant management updates are historically rare. The Army Corps released several alternative management models for the system on June 9 and plans to make a tentative selection among the models on July 16, followed by a final decision on August 4.

Governor DeSantis recently signed new legislation designed to address the water management problems that have plagued the region for years. Senate Bill 2516 advances the construction of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project with an annual infusion of $50 million. “In Florida, we are doing our part to expedite Everglades restoration projects and restore the flow of water south from Lake Okeechobee,” said Governor DeSantis. “The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is developing a new water control manual for Lake Okeechobee, and they must allow flexibility in the management to avoid harmful discharges in our estuaries and send more water south during Florida’s dry season. Status quo lake management is not an option.”

The Army Corps’ decision on the LOSOM model will affect area waters for years to come. Residents and business owners are encouraged to comment and participate in Project Delivery Team meetings held by the Army Corps, the next of which is scheduled for June 17. Additional information is available at: https://www.saj.usace.army.mil/LOSOM/

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