

Army Corps to reduce lake flows fueling Florida algae bloom

July 1 2016, by Jennifer Kay And Terry Spencer



An aerial photo shows blue-green algae enveloping an area along the St. Lucie River in Stuart, Fla., Wednesday, June 29, 2016. Officials want federal action along the stretch of Florida's Atlantic coast where the governor has declared a state of emergency over algae blooms. The Martin County Commission is inviting the president to view deteriorating water conditions that local officials blame on freshwater being released from the lake, according to a statement released Wednesday. (Greg Lovett/The Palm Beach Post via AP)

As a noxious algae bloom fouls beaches on Florida's Atlantic coast, the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is preparing to reduce the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee that many blame for fueling the problem.

The Corps' Jacksonville District planned to begin the reductions Friday, targeting the Caloosahatchee Estuary and the St. Lucie Estuary, a news release said.

The action comes after Florida Gov. Rick Scott declared a state of emergency over the problem, and as politicians and residents are blaming the federal government.

Multiple Florida lawmakers have asked federal authorities that oversee Lake Okeechobee to immediately stop freshwater releases that coastal communities blame for algae blooms and other environmental damage.

"I would describe them as guacamole-thick. And it stinks," said Gabriella Ferraro, spokeswoman for Martin County.

Florida's U.S. senators, Republican Marco Rubio and Democrat Bill Nelson, have joined Martin County commissioners in calling for the Army Corps of Engineers to stop the flow of water between the river and Lake Okeechobee. Residents and business owners blame the algae on pollutants streaming from the lake.

After touring the St. Lucie River as it passes through downtown Stuart, Nelson said the problems can be traced to Florida's history of diverting water to the ocean.



Boats docked at Central Marine in Stuart, Fla., are surrounded by blue green algae, Wednesday, June 29, 2016. Officials want federal action along the stretch of Florida's Atlantic coast where the governor has declared a state of emergency over algae blooms. The Martin County Commission is inviting the president to view deteriorating water conditions that local officials blame on freshwater being released from the lake, according to a statement released Wednesday. (Greg Lovett/The Palm Beach Post via AP)

"We need to repair 75 years of diking and draining, but that takes time," he said. He called on Florida's Legislature to spend money approved by state voters for environmental projects such as purchasing land around Lake Okeechobee for water storage instead of diverting the funds to pay for administrative costs.

Rubio on Friday toured a portion of the St. Lucie River and told of visiting one riverside home where it "smelled like an open sewer." He

called on President Barack Obama to declare a state of emergency to help businesses harmed by the massive algae bloom.

The blue-green algae is the latest contaminant featured in yearslong arguments over water flowing from Lake Okeechobee, which is critical to South Florida's water supply and flood control systems.

At Central Marine boat docks in Stuart, pea-green and brown algae coated the water Thursday and smelled strongly like cow manure. Blooms that started last week in the St. Lucie River continue to spread, threatening Atlantic beaches expecting crowds of families for the holiday weekend.

Sarah Chaney, a receptionist at Central Marine, said boaters and fisherman are cancelling reservations after seeing reports of the algae, which she called "horrible and disgusting."

When Scott declared a state emergency for the area Wednesday, he blamed the federal government for neglecting repairs to the lake's aging dike that's considered one of the country's most at-risk for imminent failure. On Thursday, he amended the emergency declaration, adding Lee and Palm Beach counties to Wednesday's emergency declaration for Martin and St. Lucie counties. Palm Beach County is located directly south of the existing emergency area, while Lee County is located on Florida's Gulf coast.



Algae covered water at Stuart's Central Marine boat docks is thick, Thursday, June 30, 2016, in Stuart, Fla. Officials want federal action along a stretch of Florida's Atlantic coast where the governor has declared a state of emergency over algae blooms. The blue-green algae is the latest contaminant in yearslong arguments over water flowing from Lake Okeechobee. Lawmakers say a southwest Florida county should be added to the state of emergency declared over an algae bloom on the Atlantic coast. (AP Photo/Terry Spencer)

Some residents blamed Scott instead Thursday. He hasn't done enough to curb pollution from farms north of the lake or purchase land farther south where lake waters could be stored and cleaned, said Irene Gomes, owner of the Driftwood Motel in Jensen Beach.

The algae has rapidly grown from a beach nuisance to a health concern, as one customer made plans to leave early if the algae triggered breathing issues, said Gomes, whose family has owned the motel's turquoise-colored cabins since 1958.

"At one point, I could say to my customers, 'Come down, it's not at all the beaches,' because it wasn't toxic. Now we're talking about health issues," Gomes said.

Chaney, the Central Marine receptionist, said Scott should visit the area, even if he gets criticized.

"He needs to come see it himself and stop being a coward," she said.

Scott said in a news release Thursday that the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity will immediately activate a virtual business emergency operations center to assess businesses impacted by the blooms. The program will begin to survey businesses affected by the water releases and share the results with various state and local agencies to implement appropriate disaster relief programs.



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Lake Okeechobee is the largest in Florida and the second largest body of freshwater in the contiguous United States. Flooding there after a major hurricane in 1928 killed at least 2,500 people in surrounding communities of mostly poor, black farmworkers. It inspired the storm central to Zora Neale Hurston's novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

To reduce the risk of a breach in the dike built after that hurricane, the Corps of Engineers tries to keep lake water levels between 12.5 feet and 15.5 feet above sea level. Shoring up the dike will take years. Meanwhile, freshwater is released east and west of the lake into the

Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

State water managers have said local stormwater runoff and septic tanks also fuel algae blooms. They're working to direct more water south of Lake Okeechobee into the parched Everglades, but federal regulations, conservation mandates and stalled restoration projects complicate those efforts.

In neighboring St. Lucie County, home to the troubled Indian River Lagoon, officials have prohibited homeowners from using fertilizer during the summer and begun working with the state to test waterways for pollution that might be linked to septic tanks.

Murky waters on southwest Florida's Gulf Coast also are blamed on the lake's discharges. Fort Myers-area lawmakers said Thursday that Scott should extend the state of emergency to Lee County because of water issues in the Caloosahatchee River.

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Citation: Army Corps to reduce lake flows fueling Florida algae bloom (2016, July 1) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-07-army-corps-lake-fueling-florida.html>

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