

REGION UNDER SIEGE BY FOUL-WATER DISCHARGES – G. Goforth
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Imagine strolling along the boardwalk under the Roosevelt Bridge and looking down into a beautiful clear St. Lucie River and being able to see sandy bottom 15 feet below. Imagine dozens of tarpon rolling west of the bridge and healthy oyster beds blanketing the shallows of the estuary to the east. Further downstream, imagine luxuriant seagrass beds as far as the eye can see up and down the Indian River Lagoon. Close inspection of the seagrass would reveal thousands of juvenile fish, seahorses, crabs, baby sea turtles and other marine life. Those images were commonplace before June 13, 1923, the day that Lake Okeechobee discharges began dumping hundreds of millions of tons of sediment, nutrients and toxic algae into the St. Lucie River and Estuary. Prior to that, excess Lake water flowed south to the Everglades, the Gulf and Florida Bay, but subsequently was diverted to the estuaries to allow for agricultural and residential development south of the Lake. The sediment from the Lake increased turbidity and decreased light penetration. Excessive nutrients fed algae blooms, further decreasing light penetration. Without light, seagrasses die. The area has lost more than 47,000 acres of seagrasses in recent years. Without the seagrasses, the juvenile fish and other marine life lost their refuge from predators, and fewer made it to maturity to sustain healthy populations. The large populations of tarpon left the River, left the estuary, left the lagoon. A thriving inshore fishing industry was wiped out and the area was no longer the “Tarpon Fishing Capital of the World”; community leaders looked offshore and recast the area for tourists as the “Sailfish Capital of the World.” The black muck from the Lake covered the once sandy bottom and filled in the River. With each successive Lake discharge, additional millions of pounds of muck oozed further downstream, such that runoff from storms sent plumes of polluted water further out into the lagoon, out the inlet, and covering the near-shore reefs. Aerial photos dramatically show dark plumes of blackwater extending miles from the inlet, in contrast to the clear blue ocean water.

As we mark the 93rd anniversary of the beginning of state-sponsored pollution of the St. Lucie River and Estuary, our region and the Caloosahatchee Estuary on the west coast are again besieged with destructive discharges of polluted water from the Lake, with no end in sight. Many of the fish and other marine life have left. Others are not so fortunate: as salinities plummeted oysters died, wiping out not only this year’s populations but disrupting the spawning of future generations as well. To call the discharges “freshwater” is wrong from both a chemical standpoint and from a public

awareness perspective; a better description is “blackwater.” Since January 30, this blackwater has carried more than 35 million pounds of sediment into the River, more than 2 million pounds of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus), and toxic algae. Water from the Lake is dirtier than it was in 2013 – a result of the state’s neglect in holding accountable those responsible for cleaning up water coming off their lands. With the passage of the 2016 Water Bill our elected officials in Tallahassee have virtually ensured that the Lake will not meet its water quality goals for decades, as deadlines were pushed back at least 20 years. For the second year in a row Legislators failed to follow the will of the voters spelled out in Amendment 1: to purchase lands and implement projects needed to solve these complex problems. The state even had a willing seller option to purchase nearly 50,000 acres south of the Lake, but failed to execute it in 2015. Necessary projects go beyond existing federal projects, and need to increase storage, treatment and conveyance all around the Lake. Until then, our regions’ economic, environmental and public health will continue to be sacrificed for the benefit of those south of the Lake, despite extensive local projects that have been, and will continue to be, undertaken by local governments.