

## **Now is the Time for Courageous Leadership By Water Management District Governing Board**

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This is a pivotal moment in our longstanding fight for clean water. Gov. DeSantis was elected on a pledge to improve and protect the water quality in the state of Florida, recognizing the vital role that clean water plays in public health, a healthy economy and a vibrant environment. Putting his words into actions, he replaced the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District with smart, creative and caring individuals that have thus far carried out his directives to take the steps necessary to improve and protect water quality. For example, at last month's meeting, the Board expanded the water quality network around Lake Okeechobee to better identify areas of pollution, enabling staff to better work with landowners to improve water quality.

The state of Florida has allowed the continued pollution of Lake Okeechobee for too long and definitive action is needed. Phosphorus loading to the lake is routinely 5 times the state-imposed annual limit of 105 metric tons from the watershed, and record levels of this nutrient have entered the lake in recent years. The state has failed to set a limit for nitrogen pollution into the Lake, which in combination with phosphorus, in 2018 contributed to the largest toxic algae bloom in history. This pollution affects those of us on the coasts – Lee County, Martin County, Palm Beach County - as billions of gallons of this toxic polluted water from the lake is discharged into our estuaries and wellfields, creating widespread adversity to our health, our economies and our environment. Studies by Florida realtor associations have estimated that the economic impact of massive discharges of polluted lake water to the estuaries approaches a billion dollars, and that doesn't include public health care costs. In addition, our own watersheds contribute pollution to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee River Estuaries: we have septic tanks, farms, ranches, and other land uses generating nutrients and other pollutants that are carried into our estuaries.

And thanks to our region's representative, Ms. Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch, and the other members of the Governing Board, the agency recently began the process to revise the regulatory program for Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie River Estuary and the Caloosahatchee River Estuary. This regulatory program is called the "Works of the District" permitting program. There are currently 977 active permits issued to landowners around the Lake. These permits contain phosphorus concentration limits that were established 30 years ago, and need to be revised in order to improve the water quality entering the lake and our estuaries. The revisions will establish reasonable and enforceable pollution reduction goals. There will be both positive and negative economic impacts of these measures, and the cost of doing business in the region may increase as landowners are required to clean up stormwater before it leaves their property. But time and again studies have shown that the public cost of preventing pollution at its source

is less expensive than having to deal with the adverse impacts of polluted water to our health, our economies and our environment.

This will not be an easy endeavor, and the Governing Board will need our support. Additional agency staff and budgets may be needed. But these revisions are necessary to ensure that all of us - private citizens, farmers, and municipalities - achieve our clean water goals. We need to make our voices heard up at Board meetings, in Tallahassee, and at other public meetings, to show our support for the Board, and for clean water, our health, our economies and our environment.

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