

State must strengthen environmental policies



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Through recent changes in environmental policies, the state of Florida has failed to protect the health of its citizens, the environment and regional economies from ongoing toxic algae crises.

As we vote this fall, it is critical we elect leaders willing to restore strong environmental policies.

The source of the toxic blue-green algae currently damaging estuarine ecosystems, regional economies and human health is a very polluted Lake Okeechobee. Members of every branch of Florida government, state agencies and others have known about the source of this pollution for more than 45 years: excessive levels of nutrient loads in stormwater from the surrounding watershed.

In 2001, the state developed a total maximum daily load of phosphorus for the lake's watershed, established specifically to reduce the frequency of algal blooms in the lake. State legislation then established a January 2015 deadline for achieving compliance.

Hundreds of millions in public funds have been spent on dairy buyouts, agricultural best management practices, regional water-quality treatment projects and other efforts. However, the state continues to allow landowners to discharge high levels of nutrients with little to no enforcement, and the pollution of Lake Okeechobee and the estuaries continues.

The water quality of the lake is at an all-time crisis level and human health, the environment and the regional econo-



About 85 people gathered on Wabasso Beach on Aug. 12 to participate in Hands Along the Water, a statewide demonstration demanding change to the water releases from Lake Okeechobee. PATRICK DOVE/TCPALM

my are suffering as polluted lake water is discharged to the estuaries.

In 2017, phosphorus loading to the lake was more than five times the total-maximum-daily-load target. The result: an algae bloom covered 90 percent of the lake this summer.

Pointing fingers at the federal government is misguided, for it is the state, not the federal government, which has the primary obligation to protect water quality. Recent policy changes in Tallahassee have exacerbated the effects of pollution of the lake and in the estuaries. These policies need to be reversed in order to control the toxic algae crises.

Our choices in the upcoming elections will be pivotal.

Examples of damaging policies that should be reversed by those elected in-

clude:

1. Significant environmental protections were dismantled in the state's 2016 omnibus water bill. For example, the January 2015 deadline to clean up water entering the lake was deleted and replaced with an ambiguous planning process. Also, a quantitative regulatory program for limiting discharges was replaced with a planning process with no enforcement provisions to hold landowners accountable for the pollution leaving their land.

2. State agencies charged with protection of water quality have had their staffs and budgets slashed in response to mandates from Tallahassee. The state Department of Environmental Protection lost more than 1,000 jobs, and the number of new enforcement cases has plummeted by 86 percent since 2010.

3. The state's annual "progress report" on pollution of the lake underestimates pollution loads and needs to be improved. For the last two years, DEP published reports indicating phosphorus loading to the lake has decreased, yet these claims conflict with the measured loads to the lake.

4. The legislative and executive branches have failed to implement the will of the people as expressed in the Florida Water and Land Conservation Initiative ("Amendment 1"). Designated funds need to be appropriated to implement storage and treatment projects around the lake.

5. The state encourages application of nutrient-rich human wastewater residuals (Class AA biosolids). These applications have been estimated at up to 1,000 tons of phosphorus into the Lake Okeechobee watershed every year. Applying biosolids in excess of plant requirements must cease.

Accelerating the state and federal projects to send more lake water south will certainly provide some long-term relief to the algae crises. However, those projects will not stop the discharge of polluted lake water to the estuaries. As long as the state fails to carry out its duty to control the pollution of Lake Okeechobee, recurring algae crises will be the norm.

By restoring strong environmental policies for the state, those we elect in November will be our best hope in resolving the toxic algae crises.

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