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### Politics, not science, ruled back-pumping decision

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By Karl E. Larsen

The South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection have taken a huge gamble that will likely come back to haunt all of South Florida next spring. Even worse, their ill-fated decision not to supplement Lake Okeechobee with currently available rainfall south of the lake was politically, rather than scientifically, motivated.

This decision affects more than agriculture. West Palm Beach was forced to hydrate well-field areas with reclaimed waste water. Broward County pulled water from water conservation areas to protect its urban well fields. Ft. Myers begged for water from Lake Okeechobee to protect sea grasses and balance salinity levels. Unfortunately, water levels in the lake were too low to help. Saltwater intrusion threatened the well fields along the populated east coast and water conservation areas were below acceptable minimum levels.

The water supply and flood control system was designed to be flexible. Pumps south of the lake were specifically designed to move water into Lake Okeechobee for later use to satisfy urban, environmental and agricultural needs. However, the system is flexible enough to send this water south in most years when more water is not needed in the lake. During the current drought, rainfall has been sporadic in the lake's northern tributaries, resulting in historic low lake levels. Rainfall south of the lake can be returned to the lake by these pumps, as has been done by every governor and DEP secretary during past droughts. Additional water stored in the lake, even if only an extra 12 inches, is a precious resource that gives water managers the ability to move water anywhere in the system.

From an environmental standpoint, the state has made a critical mistake. Water from the farms and stormwater treatment areas south of the lake is cleaner than the water currently in the lake. As a result of more than a decade of water clean-up measures, water south of the lake is cleaner than any and all other sources of water to Lake Okeechobee. The state Legislature just appropriated \$100 million a year to store and treat water north of the lake. Everyone would be dancing if these efforts resulted in water quality similar to that already available south of the lake. It makes absolutely no sense not to move that clean water to avert an even more catastrophic drought than the one we just endured.



Only a system guided by politics rather than science would refuse to put the cleanest water available into the only effective regional storage facility during the worst drought on record.

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