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## Spillway proposal for dike scrapped

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OKEECHOBEE — It sounded like a bold step to ease the burdens on the leaky Herbert Hoover Dike, open a new outlet for Lake Okeechobee and clean up the St. Lucie River.

And now it's dead.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Wednesday it has no intention of carving a 2-mile-long "spillway" into the dike's southern flank, even though an agency representative proffered the idea last week as an alternative to a lengthy, \$856 million dike repair.

Such a spillway would send excess water south toward the Everglades, just as the lake's runoff flowed for thousands of years until humans interfered. But it also would require elevating 2 miles of U.S. 27, moving a sugar mill and buying more vacant farmland than exists south of the lake to clean the polluted runoff, corps restoration leader Dennis Duke told water managers.

"We're *not* doing it," Duke said afterward. "For us, it is essentially a dead issue."

But Duke said the corps is continuing to examine the related concept of restoring some sort of natural flow between the lake and the Everglades, if it can overcome the considerable cost and engineering hurdles. That idea has been controversial since the early 1990s, when a federal science panel endorsed it, sparking an outcry from sugar growers.

Martin County commissioners last week endorsed the natural-flow concept, which some supporters call "Plan 6." Commissioner Sarah Heard said Wednesday that the county remains adamant that southward flow must be restored, with or without a spillway in the dike.

"People on the east coast and the

west coast aren't going to take no for an answer," Heard said. "It's not an acceptable answer."

Under the current system, the corps dumps most of the lake's excess water east into the St. Lucie Canal and west into the Caloosahatchee River. The dumping creates ecological havoc while wasting hundreds of billions of gallons out to sea.

But engineers at the corps and the South Florida Water Management District long have dismissed the southern-flow concept as impractical, saying the landscape is too altered to bring back ecological utopia.

"It's become sort of a cult item on the Internet," district board member Mike Collins said Wednesday during a workshop in Okeechobee.

While restoring flow would have ecological aims, Duke said the spillway concept had a more concrete goal: Easing the costs of fixing the 143-mile-long earthen dike, which a state engineering panel last year labeled a "grave and imminent danger" to human life.

The corps announced in February that the repairs would cost an estimated \$856 million, or nearly triple what it had said a year ago. The increase stemmed from rising costs for labor, fuel and concrete, as well as improvements the corps made to its repair plans to address the state's criticisms.

At the current rate of congressional spending, repairs of the most critical segments of the dike - from Port Mayaca to Moore Haven - might not be done until 2020, Duke said.

With the dike repairs rising so rapidly, Duke said the corps fell under pressure to examine other alternatives. One of those is the spillway, a concept that corps constructions and operations chief Alan Bugg presented to the Martin

commissioners last week.

Bugg said at the time that the spillway would eliminate the need to repair the dike.

Reaction from the public - and then from state officials - was explosive, district board members said.

"I'll tell you what, you took a hornet's nest and you made one of these African bee things out of it," said Lennart Lindahl, a board member from Tequesta.

But newly appointed board member Shannon Estenoz said it's no surprise that people in the Treasure Coast will latch onto proposals for rescuing their battered estuary.

"There are obviously so many folks in Martin County who are so desperate for a solution, so wanting to hear that there's going to be some bold and decisive action," said Estenoz, a longtime Everglades activist from Broward County. "Maybe your folks who were making the presentation just didn't anticipate that."

The spillway would begin moving water south when the lake reaches 12 feet above sea level - 6 feet below the water levels at which leaks become a problem. It also could address one major failing that the state's engineering panel noted last year: The dike has no emergency outlet, a commonly required safety feature in dams.

Duke said he has no estimate of how much such a spillway and the related features would cost. He added that the corps will include the idea in its report on all the alternatives it has examined - including the alternative of taking no action.

But he said nobody should take the wrong message.

"We're committed to fixing the dike," Duke said. "We need the funding to do that."