

“At Your Service” Article – June 19th, 2005
By: Senator Ken Pruitt (R-Port St. Lucie)
Word Count: 526

“Our Lake, Our Future: A New, Cohesive Effort”

Lake Okeechobee is a mess. We have lived with this undeniable truth for years, watching it affect everything from our drinking water to the health of natural ecosystems such as the St. Lucie River or the Indian River Lagoon. The correlation between Lake Okeechobee and our local rivers, lagoons and estuaries is not a new concept. But like an eye-opening realization, South Floridians finally have a profound understanding that the health of the Lake determines the health of almost every other body of water. Moreover, by failing with Lake Okeechobee, we fail exponentially with the Everglades.

Since 2000, the State of Florida has made some headway in reversing the lake’s fortune, but the results have been ‘baby steps’ in the marathon recovery. Unfortunately, the ravages of hurricane season left us in even worse shape. Now we have a murky, sediment laden body of water that the necessary sunlight cannot penetrate. Despite the bleak outlook, a new wave of commitment and recognition has begun; one that will actually make the difference.

The South Florida Water Management District Water Resources Advisory Council (WRAC) recently announced a new focused effort to help Lake Okeechobee recover. This new WRAC Lake Okeechobee Committee puts the right balance of committed people together. Strides have been made and countless hours of useful research have been performed, but like you, I feel we have studied enough with too few results. A new sustained cohesive effort among all involved parties will redirect our efforts from research to action and results.

The Lake Okeechobee Committee is composed of members representing the environmental and conservation groups, the State agencies, the agricultural industry and select members representing various invested parties. Meeting on a monthly basis, the committee will be a constant accountable watchdog for the progress of the current restoration projects.

The Florida Legislature worked to appropriate an additional \$30 million for Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan Projects this year. With the new committee in place, I expect this funding to be used more effectively and efficiently than ever before.

Why this new approach now? Last Fall’s hurricane disasters set off a simple ‘domino effect.’ Multiple storms and the associated heavy rainfall churned up and increased the amount of storm water entering the lake. The result was a barrage of nightly news stories and newspaper articles raising the publics’ awareness of how dismal Lake Okeechobee has become. In turn, the public has taken this as a call to arms on behalf of our lake, demanding that something be done.

So first let me thank all of you who have brought Lake 'O' back into the spotlight. By demanding progress towards what we set out to accomplish with the initiation of the Lake Okeechobee Protection Program, you have helped create an effort that can truly be productive. However, we are years away from restoring this natural wonder and it is absolutely essential that we continue to demand Lake Okeechobee remain a priority issue. By restoring our lake, we can protect our future.

Please contact my office at 772-344-1140 for more information about Lake Okeechobee restoration efforts or visit www.kenpruitt.com to view the latest news on the Lake Okeechobee WRAC Committee.