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The Trouble with Our Water

HOW BUSINESS
AND CIVIC LEADERS
SEARCH FOR A
SOLUTION

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BE ANOTHER
HERTZ?**

PREDICTING HOW
BUSINESS WILL DO
HERE IN 2014

**GARY TICE
A BANKER
WHO'S STAYED
AHEAD OF THE
CURVE**

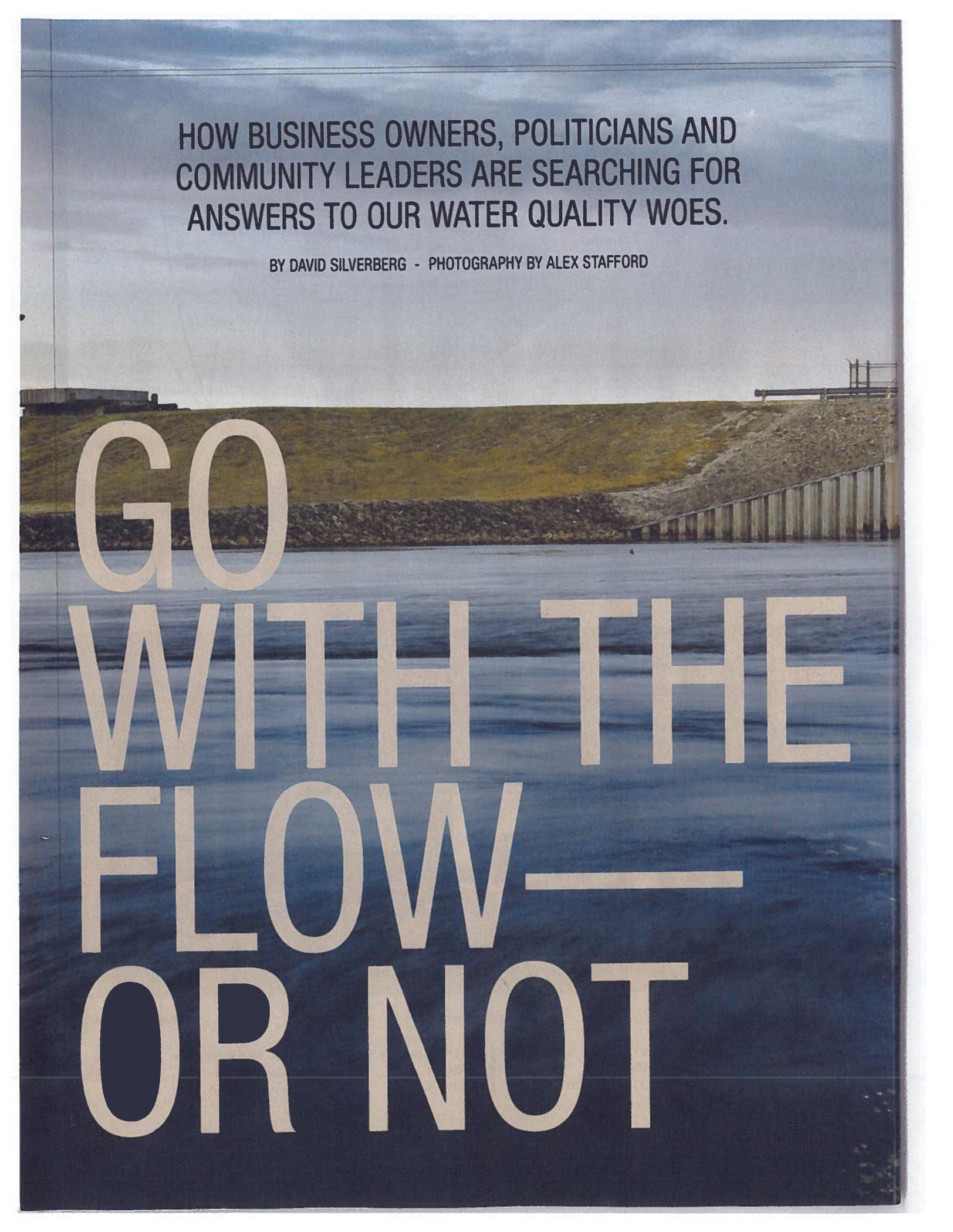
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HOW BUSINESS OWNERS, POLITICIANS AND
COMMUNITY LEADERS ARE SEARCHING FOR
ANSWERS TO OUR WATER QUALITY WOES.

BY DAVID SILVERBERG - PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX STAFFORD



GO
WITH THE
FLOW—
OR NOT



CLOSED FOR THE SEASON

The Moore Haven Lock and Dam holds back the water of Lake Okeechobee at the Caloosahatchee River.

For 170 days,

beginning on May 8, a brown tide surged from Lake Okeechobee down the Caloosahatchee River and out into the Gulf of Mexico, where it swirled northward up the coast. It was dark, ugly and smelly, and killed sea grass and fish.

The event raised distressing memories of the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill of 2010, when the southwestern shores of Florida were threatened by the prospect of tar balls and slicks. Then, tourists canceled visits, hotels went vacant, and an economy built on tourism and hospitality suffered terrible losses.

The BP disaster was the result of an industrial accident. This time, the flow resulted from a human decision. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees a dike around Lake Okeechobee, had decided to release the water that was rising up its banks, posing a threat to their structural integrity. When the Corps opened the floodgates, 6,000 cubic feet of water per second rushed out and poured down the Caloosahatchee, leading to algae blooms in the river and massive murky pools in the Gulf.

The flow generated alarmed news coverage and bitter protests all along the Southwest Florida coast. The water, full of runoff from farms, lawns and golf courses, drifted northward along Fort Myers-area beaches, threatening tourism. Environmental activists worried about the effect on marine life while fishermen and crabbers feared loss of their livelihoods. Lee County Commissioner Larry Kiker called the flows an “ongoing environmental calamity.”

The messy situation prompted community meetings and petitions as well as a scramble by elected officials to demand federal and state action—and the money required—to fix the problem.

In Tallahassee, on Aug. 28, after initially casting blame on the federal government, Gov. Rick Scott pledged that the state would pony up \$90 million over three years, thereby matching \$90 million in federal funds, to build a 2.6-mile bridge on the Tamiami Trail that would allow Lake Okeechobee water to flow into the Everglades. Right now, the historic highway effectively dams water to its north, preventing it from flowing south to Florida Bay. It was the first time state money was being pledged to maintain and upgrade the Tamiami Trail, which had been maintained with federal funds.

In Washington, D.C., Rep. Trey Radel came late to the party, organizing a hearing on the Lake Okeechobee releases that fell on Oct. 3, amid the government shut-down and the same day the Capitol was locked down because of shots being fired nearby. (Radel’s meeting predated his arrest for cocaine possession near the end of the month.) Once the government resumed operations, the House of Representatives passed a comprehensive Water Resources Development Act with a panoply of provisions affecting nearly every jurisdiction in the country.

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The bill provides federal funds for construction of the C-43 Reservoir, a 55 billion-gallon holding area west of Lake Okeechobee—near the Caloosahatchee—into which lake water could be sent rather than being immediately released into river.

Despite the spasm of action, Floridians, especially those in Lee County businesses, felt damaged.

But just how much was Southwest Florida business really affected by the release? To what extent did it harm the environment? And why did the Corps decide to do it at that particular moment?

The experience of two different towns shines a light on some of the answers—and on the water that binds together all of Florida, from the aquifer just below its sandy soil and the river of grass called the Everglades, to the Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Managing that water and its flows and channeling it to create an environment fit for human habitation is a mystery that has both dominated and bedeviled the inhabitants of Florida, dating back to paleolithic times. It’s a difficult problem because what will work for one



ON THE SPOT
Sanibel Mayor Kevin Ruane stands before the locks in Alva, through which tainted water from Lake Okeechobee runs down the Caloosahatchee to the Gulf.

area may not work for another, but both are intimately linked—as Florida’s leaders have discovered.

The Sanibel Sanctuary

Sanibel calls itself a “barrier island sanctuary,” and that’s true on many levels, for both people and wildlife. With a voting population of 6,700 that swells to as much as 30,000 to 40,000 during the tourist season, its main street is lined with picturesque shops, restaurants and boutiques. Its pristine beaches and the famous J.N. “Ding” Darling Wildlife Refuge draw tourists and seasonal residents. Modest homefronts belie elegant residences within. For many visitors it’s a place of leisure and luxury, the embodiment of what is meant by a Florida “paradise.”

Sanibel’s mayor, Kevin Ruane, is an energetic man of 53, who came to the island from New York in 2004 to take over the family accounting business after his father had his fourth heart attack. Ruane—also an accountant—had been in Sanibel for only two weeks when Hurricane Charley roared in from the Gulf, a Category 4 monster

whose eye passed directly over Captiva Island and did devastating damage to it and Sanibel.

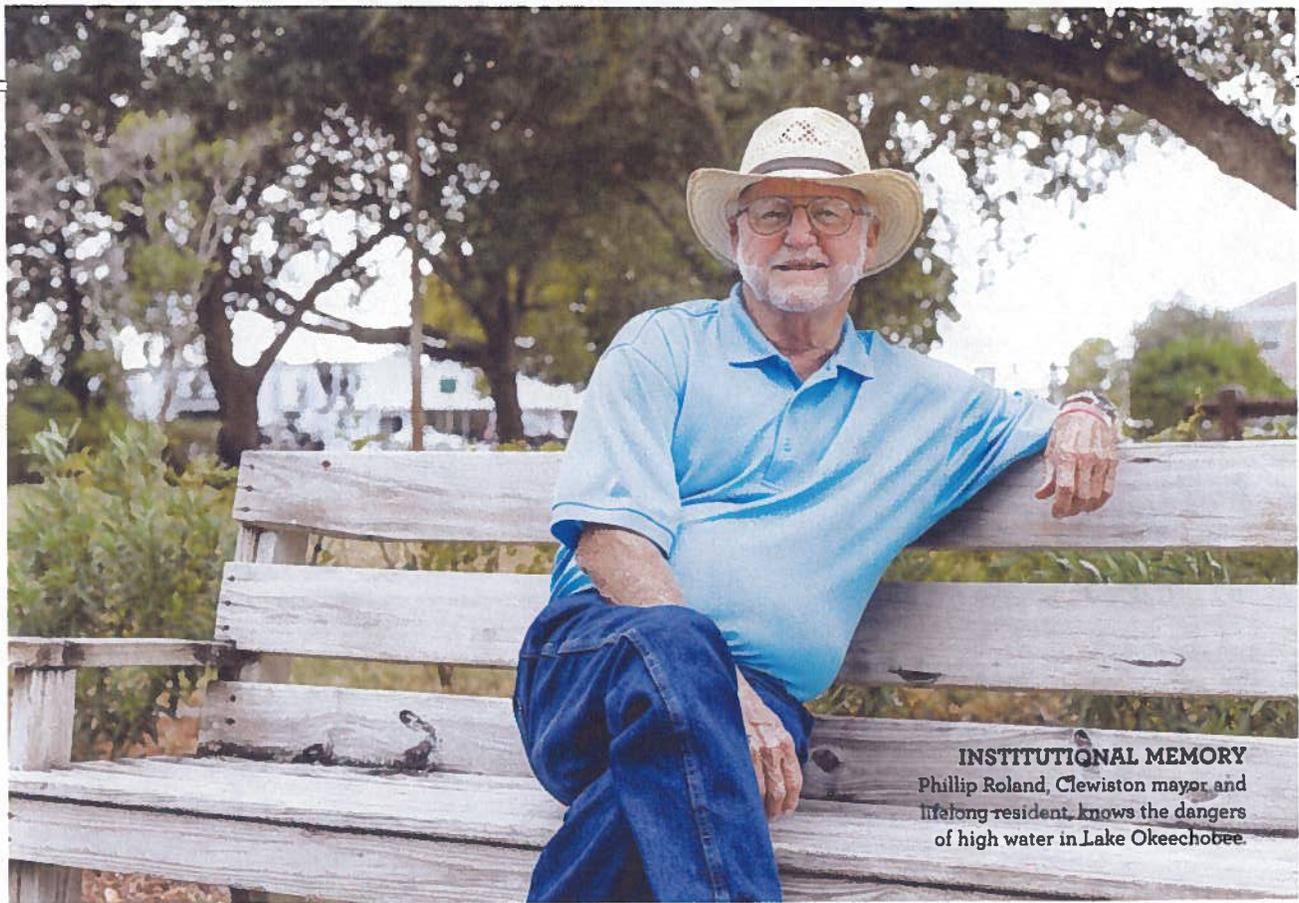
“After the storm, the city manager was talking about the structures on the island,” Ruane recalls. “I volunteered my time and was part of a damage assessment team.” Ruane’s experience in accounting and insurance was invaluable during the claims process.

Having seen a real disaster and been mayor during the potential disaster of the BP oil spill, Ruane knew a threat to his town when he saw it.

The Okeechobee release “created an environment with algae washing up on the beach because of the high nutrient load in the water,” he says. “The algae was the first indication of the release.”

America’s Sweetest Town

Eighty-five miles east of Sanibel, Clewiston, which calls itself “America’s sweetest town,” is a working community of 6,900 on the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee, set amid a flat landscape of farms and ranches and more



INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY
Phillip Roland, Clewiston mayor and lifelong resident, knows the dangers of high water in Lake Okeechobee.

ROLAND AND HIS TOWN HAVE SEEN A LOT OF DISASTERS, WHICH HAVE SHAPED AND SCARRED THEM.

than 100,000 acres of sugar cane. The single-story storefronts along its downtown streets are plain, some with hand-painted signs on their walls. The United States Sugar Corp., which occupies a red-brick headquarters in the city center, is the major employer, and the town's library and community center bear the names of U.S. Sugar executives who donated the buildings. The company operates a massive refinery on the town's edge and smokestacks belch white smoke into the air as the harvested cane is processed. It's also a quiet town: One day in October, the most immediate crisis facing the city manager was finding the right person to clean up horse droppings on the sidewalk across from city hall.

Phillip Roland, Clewiston's mayor, was sitting on a bench behind the city hall during a conversation with *Gulfshore Business* on a fall morning. Dressed in jeans and sneakers, wearing a western hat made of straw, he had an energy and a vigor that showed no evidence of his 71 years. He has lived in Clewiston all his life, with a short exception during military service from 1961 to 1964. He has been a manager for U.S. Sugar and an entrepreneur and held a variety of county and city posi-

tions before becoming the nonpaid mayor at the end of 2012, elected by his fellow city commissioners. Talking to him, one gets the sense that he personally knows every inch of Clewiston and all the residents and their parents as well.

Roland and his town have seen a lot of disasters, which have shaped and scarred them. No sooner was the town incorporated in 1925 than the following year it was lashed by the same hurricane that nearly wiped out the nascent city of Miami on the east coast. But it was in 1928 that a hurricane blew onto Lake Okeechobee and Clewiston with such violence and fury that the resulting flood killed an estimated 2,500 people. There are stories that the dead can still be seen beneath Lake Okeechobee's surface to this day.

Following that disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was given the task of constructing a dike—or, as the Corps classifies it, a dam—around the lake, both to protect the local inhabitants and to drain land for farming. From 1930 to 1937, the Corps labored on the 143-mile dike, gradually enclosing the lake with earthen berms punctuated by culverts and water gates. (In 1960,

Congress named it after President Herbert Hoover, under whose administration the work began.)

But nature was not done with Lake Okeechobee and Clewiston yet: On Sept. 17, 1947, a hurricane that would later be classed as a Category 4 made a devastating land-fall near Fort Lauderdale and howled inland, striking Lake Okeechobee and Clewiston. Water came over the Hoover Dike, but it held and 1928's disastrous flooding was not repeated.

Roland was 6 years old at the time and can still remember the uprooted trees and the debris, thrown from the shores of the lake as though by a giant hand. Today, the fanciest homes in town rest on a slight rise that was the dike at the time and is the only high point in town other than the dike itself.

There have been more storms since then: Hurricane Donna in 1960 and Hurricane Wilma in 2005—which flooded the town—but each time the Hoover Dike has held, protecting the people and the town of Clewiston and the surrounding lands from a catastrophic inundation.

But hurricanes are not the only threat.

"Lake Okeechobee is the heart of the Everglades," Roland says of America's second-largest fresh-water lake and the largest in Florida. "It's a great body of water that has been mismanaged since the Corps put a dike around it. But if you hadn't put a dike around it, you wouldn't have the industry that you have today."

In addition to rain, water full of waste and fertilizer flows into the lake from Orlando's homes, hotels, theme parks and golf courses, as well as from the Kissimmee Valley's farms, fields and ranches, raising the lake's level.

"You cannot let that lake be above 15 and a half feet during hurricane season," Roland insists. "We can stand most hurricane seasons at 15 and a half feet, although we prefer to go in at 13 and a half."

By May 2013, unusually heavy rains rapidly pushed water to the 13.5-foot mark, and hurricane season, with its massive tropical deluges, had not yet officially started.

If the water rose too high, the Corps, Clewiston and all the communities around the lake were staring at the possibility of the lake overtopping the dike, or the dike breaching, or a portion of it crumbling and collapsing and a virtual tsunami racing over the flat landscape, washing away people and towns and uprooting any structures it encountered. For the Corps, it would be a replay of Hurricane Katrina when the levees protecting New Orleans collapsed, the city flooded and lives were lost in one of the worst disasters in American history. For Clewiston, it presented a possible replay of the floods of 1928, 1947 and 2005.

The protocols were clear on what to do: Beginning in May, water was released to bring down the level of Lake Okeechobee. As the unusually active rainy season progressed, more water was released, reaching its maximum flow on July 25. By September it was apparent that 2013 was the wettest rainy season in 80 years; not since 1933

had so much water fallen from the skies—and the possibility of tropical depressions or hurricanes remained. As the threat of flooding rose, so did the volume of the water releases.

And so the dark, murky fluid roared out of the gates and frothed and churned its way to the Gulf. But for the officials responsible for managing that water, they say there was no other choice.

The past and future

In a number of ways, 2013 was a lucky year for Southwest Florida: No named hurricanes or tropical depressions struck the state. Nor did the most cataclysmic scenarios come to pass. In the east, the water releases kept Lake Okeechobee at a manageable level. (Two rivers run out of it—the Caloosahatchee to the west and the St. Lucie to the east.)

The Hoover Dike held and there was no flooding. On Oct. 21, the gates were closed for what appeared to be the last time that year and the dry season commenced.

In the west, the releases that made their way to the Gulf did not garner the kind of ongoing, months-long international publicity and alarm of the BP oil spill that kept tourists at bay. By Nov. 1, the water was again clear, the tourist season was on and Sanibel was open for business.

"I don't want an event [of this sort] but the summertime is the time to have one," observed Sanibel's Ruane. The water was released during the slowest part of the tourist season, with the fewest visitors. "It was the perfect time. If I have to have it, and there's a gun pointed at my head saying it has to happen, I would say that is when I would have it."

The impact was also relatively light at the historic Island Inn on Sanibel's Gulf coast. "There was a slight loss of revenue, about \$5,000," recalls Chris Davison, general manager and vice president of operations. "We did receive some negative reviews on Trip Advisor and Facebook." Nonetheless, he says, "We stayed booked all the way through [the releases]. Most of the time we were able to have an average occupancy rate of 97 percent."

Even the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau confirmed the relatively passing impact of the Okeechobee water releases on tourism. In the Summer 2013 Visitor Profile and Occupancy Analysis prepared by Davidson-Peterson Associates for the county, the consulting company reported that the releases "had somewhat of a negative impact on the Lee County lodging industry. According to property managers surveyed, about one-third had guests with rooms reserved for July, August or September 2013 who either cancelled or shortened their stay specifically because of concerns about water quality issues. More than half of those that did said their room revenue lost in the past three months amounted to \$5,000 or less, and 25 percent said their loss was between \$5,000 and \$10,000."

Overall, however, Davidson-Peterson reported that despite the releases, summer visits to local hotels were up 14.1 percent over the year before and Lee County saw a 5.7 percent increase in total visitation, whether the visitors stayed in hotels or with friends or relatives. The summer visitors spent an estimated \$469.9 million during their stays in Lee County—a gain of \$12.2 million or 2.7 percent over 2012. And the prospects are for even greater increases in 2014.

The releases did serve as a catalyst to pursue solutions to the problem, but largely overlooked or deliberately ignored in the announcements and press releases were their long-term nature.

“WITH THIS WATER ISSUE, THIS COMMUNITY HAS TO BE BIGGER THAN JUST WHERE WE LIVE.”

Gov. Scott’s bridge in the Everglades is only part of an expansion of marshes intended to combat pollution in the Everglades that is expected to take perhaps 20 years and \$880 million to complete. Even completing the bridge is dependent on the congressional funding process.

Even the C-43 reservoir needed to make its way to final passage as part of the Water Resources Development Act. As of November, that bill was awaiting a conference to iron out the differences between the House and Senate versions. Corps officials were hoping for a presidential signature by December.

“Once the project receives congressional authorization and appropriations, it will take approximately 6.5 years to complete the project,” Jennifer Miller, a Corps official, tells *Gulfshore Business* in an email. “This timeframe includes executing the Project Partnership Agreement, finalizing design and contract actions and physical construction of the project.”

Given the inherent congressional, funding and engineering delays and obstacles facing projects of this kind, it would be a great success if all the projects can be completed in time for the centennial of the 1926 hurricane.

Nor is everyone convinced that these measures represent a final answer. In Clewiston, Mayor Roland is skeptical of the reservoir’s success. “The Kissimmee Valley is the culprit” for Lake Okeechobee’s problems, he says, and it’s there, to the north of the lake where the water starts flowing, that the solution must be found. “The whole thing can be solved by something north of the lake. It can’t be solved south of the lake. That’s what everyone should be on board to do—north of the lake.”

What is more, differences in outlook among the affected parties remain.

“I don’t believe that [Sanibel] had so many cancellations,” Roland says. “Some people on the inner side of Sanibel might have cut their vacations short, but on the other side, there was no impact.”

Some of Sanibel’s attitude toward the overall situation was summed up by its natural resources director, James Evans III. “The system we have today was designed to get the water out of the interior out to the coast, where there were fewer people. Now there are more people on the coast,” he says. In that regard, in 2013, “the system is functioning exactly the way it was designed.” But then, a few minutes later he contradicts himself and says, “the system is broken and needs to be fixed”—but what he

clearly means is that it must be adapted to new realities of population. Evans would prefer to see a system that is more flexible and nuanced, not tied to strict numbers and water levels in Lake Okeechobee, the way it is now. But exactly how that would protect the people surrounding the lake from flooding

is not altogether clear—at least not in the years before the new projects are completed.

Despite some of the parochialism, however, there is a consciousness of the interlinked nature and the importance of Florida’s environment on the part of all parties. In Clewiston, U.S. Sugar has scrubbed its industrial processes and the town is acutely aware of keeping Lake Okeechobee as pristine as possible both for the quality of life and the freshwater fishing it prizes. In Sanibel, the city invested \$71 million in a sewer system to prevent septic pollution and passed some of the first ordinances in Florida to regulate fertilizer runoff.

Furthermore, both Roland and Ruane have seen disaster up close and neither wants to repeat the experience.

Neither does Richard Johnson, the owner of Bailey’s, a food market on Sanibel. At 113 years old, the market was the first on the island, and perhaps it is the longevity of his store that gives Johnson a long-term view. He, like Ruane, arrived in 2004 and endured the agony of Hurricane Charley, which he says brought out the best instincts of the Sanibel community amid the worst physical destruction.

“Our challenge is that we absolutely have to change how we manage that water. We need to slow it down, store it during high-flow periods and restore the watershed,” he reflects. “It’s not just the ecology; it’s for the sake of the economy. We cannot put lives at risk up in Okeechobee. It’s not us on the west coast against the farmers inside the state. It’s not even about politics; it’s about helping a community that we’re all part of. With this water issue, this community has to be bigger than just where we live.

“I look forward to this being resolved and put behind us.”