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Agencies neglect needed water flows in Caloosahatchee River | Opinion

Pleas to increase flows from the scientific community on the west coast have been ignored by the Corps of Engineers and Water Management District

Lee County Commissioner Kevin Ruane

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Key Points

Lee County officials argue that recent water management decisions have harmed the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary.

The US Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District have been criticized for restricting freshwater flows to the estuary.

Scientists and local organizations have unsuccessfully advocated for increased water flows to prevent ecological damage.

Lee County residents face stricter water restrictions than other areas receiving water from Lake Okeechobee.

US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Col. Brandon L. Bowman released an op-ed in February 2026 that stated: “Florida’s water story in 2025 was one of progress, partnership and a shared commitment to responsible stewardship.” It went on to state: “Our mission is shared. Our success is collective. And our commitment is unwavering. In the months ahead, the Corps will continue working with the South Florida Water Management District and all our partners to sustain the gains we have made, protect the environment we cherish and support

the communities that rely on this water every day. Even in a challenging dry season, that work continues — steady, coordinated and unified.”

Lee County begs to differ. Operational decisions made by the USACE and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) during the last six months have been anything but collective and certainly not for the protection of the environment.

The extended period of below-normal rainfall since early 2025 has caused the USACE and SFWMD to adopt a “water conservation” mindset. What has been left unstated by either agency is that this “conservation mindset” has meant sacrificing desperately needed fresh water to the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary (CRE) without actually “conserving water” through operational restrictions or additional conservation measures in any other part of the system.

The CRE is a complex and dynamic ecosystem that requires optimum flows to maintain beneficial salinity ranges for the organisms that need it for survival. Weather is an obvious and uncontrollable factor in estuary conditions. Low flows and lack of water, which are not as visually obvious or compelling as what we see with damaging high flows, cause just as much or more damage to the CRE ecosystem as extreme high flows. This damage is unobservable to the casual observer, but scientists and agency decision-makers are fully aware of the insidious damage that the extended period of low flows is causing.

Pleas to increase flows to the CRE from members of the scientific community on the west coast, including Lee County and science-based nonprofit organizations such as the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation and Audubon Florida, have gone ignored by the USACE and SFWMD. Requests for specific flows to the Caloosahatchee are based on established best science and recommendations from an interdisciplinary team of scientists from the very agencies (USACE, SFWMD) whose leadership has decided to sacrifice the

Caloosahatchee estuary with their decisions. Even after SFWMD leadership readily acknowledged at the March Governing Board meeting that the incremental amount of water needed to avoid causing significant harm to the environment in Lee County was negligible, the SFWMD and USACE declined to help. Meanwhile, Lee County residents are under a one-day per week watering restriction, a requirement far more strict than other areas that continue to benefit from fresh water from Lake Okeechobee.

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Despite relentless comment, requests, scientific defense of and recommendation to increase flows to the Caloosahatchee in a variety of forums and from a variety of stakeholders, agency leadership has shown an unashamed lack of communication, response, presence, engagement and concern where Lee County's environmental health is concerned. Communication directly to Col. Bowman has gone unanswered. This sporadic communication is uncharacteristic of past leadership at the USACE – an agency that once held bi-weekly calls with partner governments and maintained a regular presence of leadership in our community.

While the State of Florida has invested millions of dollars in restoration of critical tape grass beds in the Caloosahatchee, the operational decisions made in the last six months have undermined or totally negated these improvements, a colossal waste of taxpayer money. Yet this wasted money will be nothing compared to the loss of fisheries and declining water quality that we will experience during the next few years as a result of decisions from the last six months.

It is the USACE and SFWMD's role to balance many interests in the management of Lake Okeechobee and the region's water resources. The operational decisions that have been made during the past six months do not represent balance. These decisions reflect a lack of commitment to the restoration, protection and management of the CRE, and indifference to the scientific community that has – in a unified and increasing voice – called for

even the minimum freshwater flow needed to maintain a healthy environment. We expect better from the leadership at SFWMD and the USACE.

Kevin Ruane was elected to the Lee Board of County Commissioners after serving as the mayor of Sanibel for more than a decade.