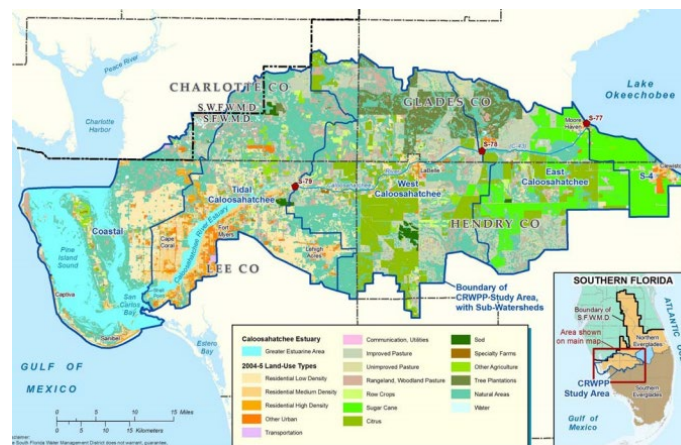


It's a Busy Time for Water Issues

Because the Florida Legislative session has ended and the rainy season hasn't yet begun, it would be easy to think that we are in the doldrums relative to water issues. Nothing could be further from the truth. As described below, there is a tremendous amount of activity on several issues that directly impact the quantity and quality of the water that surrounds the Refuge.

The Caloosahatchee Minimum Flow Level (MFL) Rule

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is responsible for establishing [minimum flows for rivers, streams, and estuaries](#). As discussed in a [previous DOTW article](#), the MFL for the Caloosahatchee River that was established in 2001 included a minimum flow of water that had to occur to achieve a salinity target that scientists believe is needed to ensure the health of the river. In 2018, the SFWMD proposed to a new rule that eliminated the salinity target. The city of Sanibel, among others, filed a suit to challenge the proposed new rule.



Although the suit was unsuccessful, at its April meeting the SFWMD board asked its staff to re-examine the issue. There has already been one open meeting on the issue and there will be [a second meeting](#) on June 20. The staff intends to make a recommendation relative to the Caloosahatchee MFL to the SFWMD board at its July 11 meeting.

The C-43 Reservoir

The [C-43 reservoir](#) is being built by the SFWMD in Hendry County, Florida. When completed in 2023, the reservoir will hold roughly 55 billion gallons of water. One reason the reservoir is important is because it will reduce unwanted flows to the Refuge by capturing and storing runoff from the Caloosahatchee River basin as well as water that is released from Lake Okeechobee. The reservoir will also improve the salinity along the Caloosahatchee estuary by providing necessary flows during the dry season.

Until earlier this year there was not an agreed-upon plan to implement any water treatment for the C-43 reservoir. In January 2019, Governor DeSantis signed an executive order that calls for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) to work with the SFWMD to add water treatment to the reservoir. Recently an interagency group was formed to identify at least three feasible ways to add water quality treatment to the C-43 reservoir. The group plans on holding public meeting starting in the fall and has the goal of completing the study within 18 months.

The EAA Reservoir and the Tamiami Trail

In addition to the progress being made on the C-43 reservoir, progress is also being made on two other critical water-related projects. In early June, the SFWMD announced that it will begin construction of the EAA reservoir and an associated stormwater treatment area (STA) 18 months earlier than previously planned. The EAA is now expected to be completed in 2027. The completion date for the STA had been 2024. A revised completion date for the STA is not yet available. See [more](#).

In early June Governor DeSantis announced that the U.S. Department of Transportation has matched the state of Florida's \$40 million for the Tamiami Trail by awarding an additional \$60 million. This means that Phase II of the project to raise of the Tamiami Trail is fully funded. When complete, the project will allow more water to flow south to Everglades National Park and, hence, less water will have to flow from Lake O to the Refuge. See [more](#).

Height of Lake O

On June 6, the [height of Lake O](#) was 10.94 feet. This is significantly lower than it was at this time last year. That is good news for the Refuge, because it reduces the likelihood that the Army Corps would have to make massive releases from the lake. However, not everyone is happy with the lake being low. Many people who make their living in the Lake O area say that the lower level has reduced their business by 80%. See [more](#).

This is not the only group alarmed about the height of the water in the lake. Several East Coast communities, such as West Palm Beach, rely on Lake O for drinking water. They are concerned that a low lake level, combined with a drought, will result in insufficient drinking water. See [more](#).

Webinars and Workshops

Several organizations have been hosting informative workshops and webinars on a broad range of water quality topics. These include:

- In early June, the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership hosted an all-day workshop that covered several topics relative to the C-43 reservoir. Click [here](#) to see the slides from that workshop.
- The Army Corps of Engineers recently hosted a series of six half-hour webinars on topics related to water management in South Florida. Click [here](#) to see the slides from the webinar.
- The SFWMD has been holding monthly workshops on water-related topics. Click [here](#) to see the video of their workshop on issues related to water quantity. Click [here](#) for the video of the first of two workshops on issues related to water quality.

Another source of education is the [web page](#) hosted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which contains a dashboard that highlights the status of algal blooms. The site also contains FAQs, information on health risks, and a way to subscribe to weekly updates.