

Eve Samples: Federal government, Martin County both need to protect waters

By Eve Samples

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Dear Federal Government,

May I call you Fed? After all these years of spatting over aviation grants and Lake Okeechobee discharges, I feel like we've gotten plenty intimate.

It's me, Martin County. You can call me Martin. I don't mind.

I'm writing because I'm a little worried that I'm sending mixed signals. I hate to come across as fickle, even if we have had our ups and downs.

On the one hand, I'm suing you. To be more precise, a group of my residents is suing you.

The Rivers Coalition's lawsuit to stop the Army Corps of Engineers' discharges from Lake O is finally headed to court this year — three years after it was filed.

I really hope we win.

Sure, my St. Lucie Estuary looks better than it did in 2005, when toxic algae blooms clung to its surface like slime. Remember? It was because of your incessant fresh-water discharges from Lake O.

No, it's not that bad now. But anyone who's spent time on the South Fork of the St. Lucie River knows what the water looks like up close: It's still chocolate brown.

You can't see deeper than six inches below the surface. Thick, suffocating muck remains at the bottom.

Just try catching a fish. It's not easy. Ask the travel writers who were here during last week's fishing event. Snook season could be a big disappointment this year, too.

Get to the point, you say.

I know, I can be a little long-winded. Have you ever watched one of my county commission meetings?

Well, I'm worried that you might think I'm wishy-washy because, at the same time this lawsuit is coming to a head, my commissioners are thinking about letting people build closer to my waterways.

Instead of requiring buildings to be 20 feet away from my shores, Commissioner Doug Smith has proposed reducing that setback so restaurants and marinas on certain properties with sea walls and bulkheads can sit closer to the water.

If the changes are approved at Tuesday's commission meeting, buildings could go up within 10 feet of the shore in redevelopment areas.

Only 28 properties would be affected by this rule change — but it doesn't send a great message about protecting my waterways, does it?

I can hear your booming voice in my mind now: "Building closer to the shore poses more risk in hurricanes."

Fed, I don't want to ask you for more emergency money than I have to after the next storm knocks me around. But I'm warning you now that I might have to if this rule change is approved.

If I seem fickle, maybe it's only fair.

You're a little fickle, too, Fed.

Even though you've been dumping about 144 billion gallons of freshwater into my estuary every year, you're also giving me money to clean up it up.

This summer, you awarded me a \$4 million grant to build oyster bed reefs in the St. Lucie River.

I guess I'm a little confused. A tad hurt. That's probably why I act so erratically sometimes.

Here's an idea: Why don't we both stop being fickle?

I'll get serious about protecting my estuary by getting the commissioners to drop the idea of building closer to my waterways.

And you can get serious by stopping the Lake O discharges. That's really what I want out of the Rivers Coalition lawsuit.

What do you think, Fed? Can we give it a go?

With lots of love (and a little hate, too),

Martin

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