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Sam Poole: Editorial wrong about chief source of Lake O pollution

Sam Poole - Guest Opinion

You are right to warn your readers about the pollution of Lake Okeechobee with phosphorus-enriched stormwater; the rapidly declining condition of the Lake is one of Florida's critical environmental problems. However, your June 23 editorial and cartoon attributing the pollution to backpumping of farm fields seriously misinforms your readers.

South Florida Water Management District records for 2003-08 show an average of 97 percent of the annual phosphorus load to Lake Okeechobee came from the watersheds north of the Lake. The toilet in your cartoon is actually flushing into the Lake the polluted stormwater from developments all the way to Orlando.

The only part of Everglades restoration that has been completed and is meeting targets is the cleanup of stormwater runoff from the Everglades Agricultural Area into the Everglades. Ironically, the success of the EAA stormwater treatment areas is now threatened by the increasing pollution of Lake Okeechobee.

Your readers should be seriously concerned for the health of the lake and river because the amount of pollution flowing into Lake Okeechobee from the northern basins is increasing, and there are no projects in any phase of design or construction that will reduce the pollution to the levels required by Florida Law in 2015. The continued pollution of Lake Okeechobee combined with a hurricane could quickly push the lake over the edge into massive algal blooms and fish kills.

Unfortunately, you make it even more difficult to solve the lake's problems when you misunderstand where the pollution is coming from.

The pollution of Lake Okeechobee is one of the most critical problems facing Florida. Your readers can help mobilize the resources to avoid the looming catastrophe only if they are well informed. Please call the South Florida Water Management District, Florida DEP and other sources you trust to verify the sources of the lake's pollution and make your readers effective advocates.

- Samuel E. Poole is an attorney for Berger Singermen, which has represented the sugar industry in Lake Okeechobee issues, and is a former executive director of the South Florida Water Management District.

- EDITOR'S NOTE: The News-Press agrees that pollution from the north is a bigger lake and Caloosahatchee River pollution problem than backpumping from sugar cane fields.