LAKE APOPKA'S CROSS ROADS

The Lake Apopka Restoration Summit was held on Dec. 14, 2011 to consider methods to speed restoration and lower its cost. Two ways forward where discussed . One defined restoration as a clear water lake the other as a hydrilla dominated large mouth bass fishery.

The St John River Water Management District goal is clear water by stopping the algae bloom on Lake Apopka. They are using a marsh flow way; gizzard shad removal; and hydrilla control programs. The District also is restoring the marshes located north of Lake Apopka which will be finished in 2012. Their plans would take 7 years to complete.

The bass fishery would use lake draw downs to dry an area of about 3000 acres around the shoreline. Dry sediments would be pushed onto rubble and rocks to form jetties built in Lake Apopka. Hydrilla growth would be allowed in the fish area. This plan would take 5 years to complete.

When allowed to grow in Florida waterways hydrilla is not well behaved. Hydrilla's explosive growth forms dense mats which could quickly cover nearly all of Lake Apopka's water surface in 1 or 2 growing seasons. Hydrilla needs only 1% of the surface light to begin active growth. Small fragments can drift off and start new colonies. Complete hydrilla eradication is difficult because it leaves tubers in the sediment which can sprout after lying dormant for years. Tuber sprouting can be stimulated by low water levels.

For bass, hydrilla provides a surface for macroinvertebrates which serve as food for fish and also provide cover for juvenile bass. But native submerged lake plants can provide the same benefits.

The District says that native submerged plants, such as eel grass can grow in Lake Apopka if light is made available to them. Their plan is to stop the algae bloom by limiting the phosphorus concentration and allowing more light to reach the lake bottom. Critics of the District's plan say that the loose sediments in Lake Apopka will prevent native plants from taking root and growing on the lake bottom. Facts given at the Summit support the District. Eel grass is now growing in colonies all around the shoreline of Lake Apopka. Some in muck 3 feet deep. Rooted hydrilla patches have been found growing in the center of the Lake. These were killed before they could spread. If large amounts of dead hydrilla are sent to the lake bottom they will increase the nutrient available to keep algae growing.

The District currently controls hydrilla by spotting and eradicating small patches quickly. The average cost is $54,000 per year (last 8 years). The estimated cost to keep hydrilla from growing outside of the bass fishery area is $750,000 to $1,000,000 per year. If it gets out of control and covers 60% of of Lake Apopka surface, killing it could take all of the $18.6 million budgeted for Florida aquatic weed control in 2011. In this event, it probably would to be left in the lake and trails cut in the hydrilla for boat access to fishing areas.

Letting hydrilla grow in Lake Apopka is high risk and costly. I believe we should stay with the quick eradication of all small patches by the District. In a time of limited funds this low cost and effective hydrilla control program should get top funding priority.

At the Summit the District presented measurements (graphs) that show higher water levels in Lake Apopka yield lower algae (chlorophyll) levels. Conversely, lower annual water levels increase algae. Methods which increase the average water level in Lake Apopka can speed lake restoration to clearer water. Droughts and draw downs delay it.

The aesthetic value of clear water in Lake Apopka has great public appeal, it can also grow the submerged native plants which attract large mouth bass. Clear water can bring more Central Florida jobs; such as ,those for the development of communities near the lake.

The north shore marsh restoration should be completed. It is already one of Florida's premier birding attractions for visitors and tourists.

To the extent possible these District programs should be funded rather that the premature creation of a large mouth bass fishery.

James Hawley 12/29/2011 Friends of Lake Apopka