

MiamiHerald.com

Posted on Wed, Sep. 12, 2007

Army Corps' shoddy work cited in major Everglades project

By BRIAN SKOLOFF

A major Everglades restoration project is stalled because of shoddy work managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on a reservoir that could threaten an interstate and nearby communities if levee walls were to fail, state officials said Wednesday.

While the corps hired an outside contractor to do the work, the agency "was ultimately responsible," said George Horne, deputy executive director of the South Florida Water Management District.

"If it were filled to capacity and it were to rupture, you would certainly flood" Interstate 95 and surrounding communities, Horne said.

He said the Ten Mile Creek reservoir needs about \$13 million for repairs to fix leakage in levee walls and embankments, parts of which are already crumbling, among other problems. The project is intended to help restore natural flow to the Everglades ecosystem.

Construction was completed last year but the district has only been able to fill the reservoir with about 684 million gallons - only 38 percent of the intended 1.8 billion gallon capacity - because of safety concerns.

The project also does not meet new safety requirements developed after Hurricane Katrina, Horne said.

"It does not and cannot operate as intended," he said.

It was initially a \$27 million project, including state and federal funds, but eventually climbed to about \$35 million. With the needed repairs, the total project will now cost about \$48 million, Horne said.

Alan Bugg, chief of construction and operations for the corps' Jacksonville office, assured water district board members the problems would be fixed.

"Public safety is our number one priority," Bugg said.

"Shame on us," Bugg repeatedly said for failing to provide the district with information on the problems and a timetable for repairs.

The corps is currently working to shore up the 143-mile-long Herbert Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee after a state-commissioned report last year found it was highly vulnerable to breaches and bore "a striking resemblance to Swiss cheese." More than 45,000 people live in the potential flood zone near the lake.

Horne said work on the dike and the levees around the Ten Mile Creek reservoir were similar jobs, but it appeared, at least for now, the dike repairs are in better shape.

The same company that issued the dike report, BCI Engineers & Scientists, Inc., also performed a recent study on the reservoir and noted "a number of areas of localized distress ... that could eventually compromise dam integrity and require major repairs."

The 550-acre reservoir near Fort Pierce, about 130 miles north of Miami, is supposed to be storing stormwater runoff to keep deluges from flowing into the Indian River Lagoon, part of the overall Everglades ecosystem and one of the most biologically diverse estuaries in North America.

A water district subcommittee on Wednesday recommended giving the reservoir back to the corps to fix the problems.

Corps spokeswoman Nanciann Regalado said the agency would decide how to move forward with repairs, and determine whether the problems were caused by design flaws or shoddy work.

Also Wednesday, the district announced that phosphorous reductions from farm runoff into the Everglades fell short of annual requirements for 2007. Agriculture achieved just an 18 percent reduction in the amount of phosphorus entering the Everglades during the period between May 2006 and April 2007. The state's Everglades Forever Act calls for a 25 percent annual reduction of the life-choking nutrient that is a common ingredient in fertilizer.

However, farmers remained in compliance because reductions are measured over three-year periods, and the goals have been met each previous year since the act was created in 1994, district officials said.

Water managers believe sediments from Lake Okeechobee stirred up during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, along with a recent 18-month drought, contributed to this year's increased phosphorous levels.

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