

# Too much salt in the Loxahatchee's wounds?

How to balance salinity levels is among remaining questions as Loxahatchee restoration moves forward.

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For the first time in 25-30 years, "all the planets seemed to be aligned and some progress will be made" in restoring the Northwest Fork of the

Loxahatchee River, according to Patricia Walker of the South Florida Water Management District.

The District and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) are working together to implement the Loxahatchee River Restoration Goal and Plan. At the present time the District is working with Palm Beach County, West Palm Beach and other governmental entities to create a plan to get 50-50 funding from the

federal government for some of these projects.

But it will take more than galactic alignment to hammer out all the intricacies involved in restoring the Northwest Fork, which includes the area designated as "Wild and Scenic". As Walker and others involved in the project have learned, their efforts must entail a careful balance of restoration and preservation along the 7.6 mile stretch of the Northwest Fork, from River Mile

13.5 to River Mile 6, which is located just south of Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

"Things are in the works, and everyone needs to come together for a common purpose," said David Brown, Jupiter's Water Utilities Director and the chairman of the Loxahatchee River Restoration Initiative, a group of 13 governmental agencies and environmental

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interest groups focused on obtaining funding for some of the river's restoration projects. "There is a fine balance that is part of this restoration plan."

The report on the SFWMD/FDEP first meeting has raised the eyebrows of some Loxahatchee River advocates, who are concerned that the last two miles of the restoration area — from River Mile 8.5 to River Mile 6 — may not be brought to the freshwater levels once envisioned.

"This is only our first meeting, and there are more discussions to follow," said Dick Roberts, biologist with the Jonathan Dickinson State Park and a member of this joint committee said. "We're only in the initial stages of determining what water flows are best for restoration of the plant communities along the river."

Said Walker: "The commitment that both agencies have made is that we want to restore and protect the whole Wild and Scenic part of the river. In our committee meeting we made the decision that one part of the Loxahatchee River Watershed would not be sacrificed to benefit another part of the watershed."

As part of the commitment, the two agencies will

be undertaking a pilot program within the next six months to see if a salinity barrier — an inflatable bladder that would lie on the bottom of the river, and could be inflated when necessary — would help the salinity encroachment during the dry season.

"One of the challenges with a salinity barrier," Walker said, "is that you have to take care of the navigational and recreational aspects of the river and consider the natural resources, such as the movement of the manatees. At the same time, we are hoping to install a barrier that will have some merit in terms of keeping saltwater from intruding too far."

The committee's schedule for the restoration plan is to have a draft ready for review in August, and to open this draft for public comment during the ensuing six

months. Once public comments are heard, considered and any changes are made to the plan, the final plan prepared for the Governing Board approval will be ready in September 2005.

The restoration is needed due to years of misuse, overdevelopment and nature's encroachment from the sea. Several forces have combined to create an influx of saltwater into the freshwater of the river. One of the chief culprits is the Jupiter Inlet, which was permanently opened and widened in 1947, allowing the saltwater from the Atlantic Ocean to move ever further into the river's fresh water.

"We are trying to mitigate the impact of the inlet that has been open since 1947," said Walker. "We are trying to balance the protection of one area of the river and bring benefits to the other areas."