

INDIAN RIVER LAGOON

C-44 Reservoir cost \$339 million, but it's leaking and holding 80% less water than it should



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A \$339 million reservoir designed to curb Lake Okeechobee discharges to the St. Lucie River is leaking, so the Army Corps of Engineers had filled it to only 20% of its maximum capacity for most of this year.

The C-44 Reservoir's water level had been 3 feet instead of 15 feet since March, meaning it was holding about 3.26 billion gallons of water instead of 16.5 billion gallons — about 13.2 billion gallons less than it should have been.

The agency, which is in litigation with the construction contractor, is designing a solution, but has not estimated how much that will cost or how long that will take, Col. James Booth said. A few "catching facilities" that could include wells are being designed to intercept the water, Booth said in September.

"We're really trying to make sure we get this solved so it runs well for many, many decades," Booth said of the reservoir, which Lt. Gov. Jeanette Nuñez called "a crown jewel in all of Florida's resources" during a November 2021 ribbon cutting ceremony.

The reservoir is still within the planned two-year period of operational testing, the Army Corps stressed.

C-44 Canal in Martin County

The reservoir's water level had increased to 6 feet by Friday, an Army Corps spokesperson told TCPalm, which has been asking the agency questions about the leak for months. The agency has not explained when, how or why the water level increased. TCPalm does not know whether it's from rainfall or the agency pumping it from the canal, and why they would do that if they were previously concerned about the water level.

Herbicide kills invasive plant

An invasive plant in the canal is another reason the reservoir isn't holding as much water as it should.

Limnophila sessiliflora was blocking reservoir water from flowing into the stormwater treatment area (STA), Lt. Col. Todd Polk said in August, before he retired.

The agency treated a 1.5-mile swath with the herbicide Flumioxazin twice this summer, Markovitch said. It's "probably not" present now, but could return because it's fast-growing and can regrow from fragments, he said.

"It's not a one-time battle," he said.

C-44 Reservoir and STA

The C-44 Canal, which runs 23 miles from the Port Mayaca dam in Canal Point passed Indiantown to the St. Lucie dam in Stuart, collects Lake O water and stormwater runoff from the surrounding area, mostly from western Martin County farms.

The reservoir was designed to capture canal water — some Lake O discharges and 65% of the stormwater runoff — by gravity moving the water into a 2-mile-long canal that runs perpendicular to Citrus Boulevard.

From there, the water is pumped into the STA, where it's cleaned by plants such as cattails that suck up pollutants.

From there, it's pumped back into the canal, where it's sometimes released into the St. Lucie River through the St. Lucie dam.

Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP)

After Congress approved the project in 2007, the South Florida Water Management District spent \$173 million, including \$27 million from Martin County's special 1-cent sales tax, to buy and clear 12,000 acres for the:

3,400-acre reservoir, which the Army Corps built as a rectangle measuring approximately 2 miles by 3 miles across either way and 15 feet at its deepest point

6,300-acre STA, which the SFWMD built to hold 3.1 billion gallons of water.

The reservoir and STA can store a combined 19.7 billion gallons of water, which could fill the Houston Astrodome to the brim every 10 hours.

The STA was completed in November 2019 and the reservoir in November 2021. It's the first fully completed project among 68 in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), designed to restore, protect and preserve the River of Grass ecosystem.

The Army Corps said it could not comment on its ongoing litigation with Barnard Construction Co. Inc., which it paid \$197 million on Sept. 11, 2015, to build the reservoir.

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