

THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY

IN BALANCE

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY



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Photo: South Florida Water Management District

Allapattah Flats Wetland Reserve Completion

The year 2021 started on a positive note with the completion of the Allapattah Flats Wetland Reserve project in western Martin County. During the January 21, 2021 ribbon-cutting ceremony, South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board Chair Chauncey Goss stated, “The goal is to improve the quality, quantity, timing, and distribution of water.”

The SFWMD Governing Board was joined by the Martin County Board of County Commissioners, representatives of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, and members of the public, to celebrate putting the 13,000 acres of land into conservation, almost half of which includes restored wetlands. The reserve will also provide a natural habitat for wildlife.

The Allapattah Flats were jointly purchased by SFWMD and Martin County, while the restoration was undertaken in cooperation with the USDA National Resources Conservation Service.

Among significant improvements to the property, water levels have been adjusted to help restore the land to its natural condition.

The reserve will work in conjunction with other Everglades projects being completed in the coming years that reduce damaging discharges to the St. Lucie Estuary from the local basin and Lake Okeechobee.

At the end of the ceremony, symbolically, a blue heron, previously cared for by Busch Wildlife Sanctuary, was released into the habitat.

Watch the ribbon cutting ceremony with this link: <http://bit.ly/Allapattah> ■



Water Releases into St Lucie River End High Hopes to Avoid Another Lost Summer

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) stopped water discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St Lucie River and reduced the amount released into the Caloosahatchee River on April 10, 2021.

In early March, the ACOE began the water releases in anticipation of, and in preparation for, the upcoming hurricane season.

This news is a huge relief for many, who remember the “Lost Summers” of 2013, 2016, and 2018, when Lake O water discharges led to massive toxic algae outbreaks in the St Lucie to the east and the Caloosahatchee to the west.

The ACOE attributed the latest decision to a lack of rainfall and a receding lake, not the blue-green algae that was spotted in



Photo: Ed Lippisch and Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch, March 22, 2021

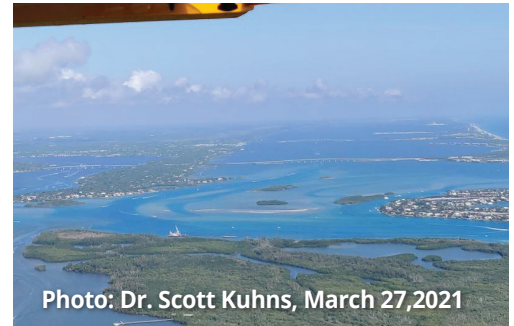


Photo: Dr. Scott Kuhns, March 27, 2021

the C-44 canal near the St. Lucie Locks and Dam in early April.

After hearing the good news, Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch, a member of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board told us, “It is great news that the ACOE has stopped the discharges. The oysters, wildlife, and seagrass of the St Lucie River now have a chance.”

Just as they have done since 2013,

Thurlow-Lippisch and her husband Ed Lippisch, began monitoring the area’s water quality from their plane, looking for changes in the water and potential algae outbreaks. Their aerial photos are shared here: <https://jacquithurlowlippisch.com>.

Thurlow-Lippisch says they will continue flying and observing the water, but less often, twice a month instead of weekly, as long as the releases do not start again. ■

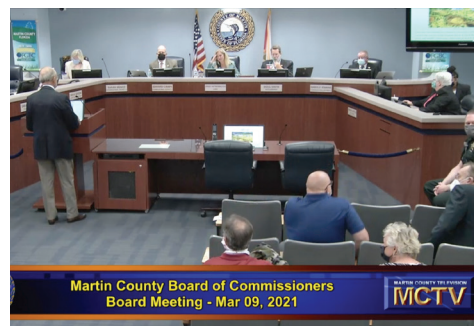
LOXA-LUCIE UPDATE

Board of Martin County Commissioners Endorsed Land Conservation Project

On March 9, 2021, The Guardians of Martin County presented the land conservation initiative known as “The Loxa-Lucie Headwaters” to Martin County Commissioners during the Board’s public meeting.

Following an introduction of key team members by GMC President Peter H. Conze, Jr., Executive Director Greg Braun shared the benefits of protecting the nearly 70,000 acres of broader Headwaters land to the Commissioners.

As we’ve written in past articles, this is a multi-year project that would create a protected ecological corridor connecting the sources of the Loxahatchee River and the St. Lucie River to form a preserve for



Martin County Board of Commissioners Board Meeting - Mar 09, 2021



Photo: G. Smith

plants and wildlife.

Following a broad discussion, the Board formally endorsed the initiative. Commissioners also asked the County Administrator to return with an Agenda Item to find funding sources to purchase properties in the Headwaters domain and other environmentally valuable lands.

At the end of the meeting, Conze

thanked Commissioners and added “Let’s keep working together; partnership is the key word – the future of Martin County is at risk.”

View the meeting video with this link: <http://bit.ly/MCCendorse>.

For a full list of endorsements, go to <https://www.loxalucieheadwaters.org>. ■

BRIGHTLINE UPDATE

MIAMI TO ORLANDO ROUTE

Brightline has reported that construction of its railway from Miami to Orlando will be completed in late 2022. As many crossings are double tracked to allow the simultaneous passing of freight and passenger trains, signs warning of trains travelling over 80 mph are being added in some densely populated communities along the route.



Brightline operated between Miami, Ft. Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, beginning in 2018. However, the higher-speed passenger train service was stopped in March 2020 following the Coronavirus pandemic. 250 workers lost their jobs as a result.

While the higher-speed train was in service, however, on average more than one person a month was killed on the tracks. An analysis by The Associated Press found that this was the worst death rate per mile of any of the nation's comparably sized railroads. Meanwhile, this service remains closed until further notice.

VIRGIN TRAINS LAWSUIT

Formerly a partner with Brightline, Virgin Enterprises, owned by billionaire investor Sir Richard Branson, is now suing Brightline for more than \$250 million in damages, accusing Brightline of using the COVID-19 pandemic to get out of its trademark licensing deal prematurely.

The original agreement allowed Brightline to rebrand its rail service as Virgin Trains USA. But, in the summer of 2020, Brightline announced to investors it was terminating its relationship with Virgin Trains. Virgin now claims the licensing deal was breached and therefore it is entitled to compensation.

BOMB TRAINS IN FLORIDA

In mid-February 2021, TV station CBS 12 in West Palm Beach published an investigative story about the dangers of transporting liquified natural gas (LNG) on the same railroad as the Brightline passenger trains. Now, in a federal lawsuit, the group Earthjustice claims that a train of 110 tank cars filled with LNG would have five times the destructive energy of the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

Currently 15 states are fighting to keep LNG-bearing trains off their tracks, while Florida and Alaska are running the only two pilot programs in the country where LNG is transported on trains. Vero Beach's Susan Mehiel of "The Alliance for Safe Trains" is fighting to prevent trains from carrying LNG on the tracks along the Treasure Coast. Mehiel maintains the trains pass too

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2021 Florida Legislative Session: March 2nd – April 30th

STUART LAWMAKER INTRODUCES BILL TO REPEAL M-CORES PROGRAM

Signed into law by Governor DeSantis in 2019, the Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance, or "M-CORES," established toll roads on three corridors through predominantly rural and environmentally sensitive lands along our state's southwest coast.

Senator Gayle Harrell's current Senate Bill 100 would repeal that legislation. As of this publishing, SB 100 has passed the Florida Senate and must also be passed by the House before it can land on the Governor's desk.

Jane West, Policy and Planning Director for "1000 Friends of Florida" and a GMC Board Advisor, says SB 100 could have positive impacts on environmental assets of statewide importance, leaving more

money available for transportation priorities in other parts of the state, including Martin County.

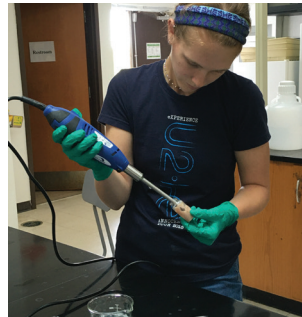
We're also focusing on House Bill 333/Senate Bill 722, which would bar oil and gas drilling within the Everglades Protection Area, which includes Everglades National Park.

For the latest legislative updates visit 1000 Friends of Florida.

<https://1000fof.org> ■



Photos: ORCA



BRIGHTLINE UPDATE: BOMB TRAINS IN FLORIDA

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close to schools and could place their communities in danger. She is campaigning for a federal crash study to be done on the dangers of LNG tankers. Watch the story:

<https://cbs12.com/news/cbs12-news-i-team/bomb-trains-in-florida> ■

Guardians Donate Microscope to Study Toxins in Area Fish

The ability to look closely for signs of toxins in area fish is now improved, thanks to the donation of a highly sophisticated microscope by the Guardians to the Ocean Research & Conservation Association (ORCA).

This special high-power microscope is being used to identify specific cyanobacteria, certain algae species and types of microplastics in fish samples. Cyanobacteria in fish produces a wide variety of toxins called cyanotoxins, of which microcystin is the most common. Studies are being conducted on the potential effects of chronic exposure to microcystins on human health.

Professional scientists at ORCA, along with "citizen scientists," have analyzed almost 300 fish caught in area waterways

since the Guardians funded an initial study in 2018. Almost 40 of the fish were caught in Martin County and their samples were then analyzed at ORCA's Center for Citizen Science.

ORCA reports that a significant portion of its project budgets have included contract laboratory analyses costs. As ORCA increases the number of water, sediment, and fish samples analyzed as part of its One Health program, with the use of the GMC-donated microscope, more of this work can be accomplished in the ORCA laboratories, thereby decreasing costs and the time it takes to obtain test results.

As reported in the Water Releases story in this newsletter, Martin County

has been particularly vulnerable to algae blooms because of the effluent flowing through its generally fresh water canals, including the C-44, that introduce pollutants coming from Lake O and its adjacent agricultural lands, into the St. Lucie Estuary and the Indian River Lagoon.

ORCA has responded, "We are incredibly grateful to the Guardians of Martin County for the support. Our research team is extremely excited about the new microscope!"

The Guardians are hopeful our support will stimulate further donations to ORCA and are considering a significant matching gift challenge to prompt other supporters to help ORCA increase its analytical capabilities while reducing its costs. ■

Our Mission

The Guardians of Martin County is a 501(c)3 organization committed to helping shape a positive future for Martin County, by educating residents about the value of balancing natural and man-made resources to enrich the quality of life in our communities.