

# Groups unite for Peace River

## Landowners, state and local agencies join forces

By **GREG MARTIN**

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PUNTA GORDA — Several initiatives emphasizing cooperation with land owners rather than regulations are under way to restore the Peace River from its headwaters in central Florida to Charlotte Harbor, several group leaders told an audience of more than 150 Wednesday.

The new philosophy is key because simply relying on land-use regulations isn't working, warned Mike Britt, natural resources manager for the city of Winter Haven.

"New development will result in impacts if existing rules and regulations are followed," he said. "It will continue to decline."

Britt was one of some three dozen speakers at the Charlotte Harbor Watershed Summit, under way Wednesday and today at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center.

He presented his city's initiative to work with Polk County, the Southwest Florida Water Management District and upper Peace watershed property owners to identify sites where marshes and sloughs could be restored.

The wetlands are needed to store more water for the Winter Haven Chain of Lakes and the upper Peace River, he said.

Property owners could be offered expedited development approvals in exchange for preserving wetland sites, he said.

In turn, the restored wetlands could be turned into nature parks. That would increase property values, he said.

Other initiatives discussed Wednesday included one by Julie Morris and Dave Sumter of Wildlands Conservation, a Venice organization working to facilitate the establishment of a wildlife corridor from the Green Swamp to Charlotte Harbor. The group is talking with landowners about options for selling conservation easements or land to government agencies, Morris said.

Those initiatives fit the concept of an even broader pilot project by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Called the Cooperative Conservation Blueprint Strategies for Southwest Florida, the project calls for agencies and big land owners to prioritize wildlife corridors and water resources and draft incentives to preserve them, said Christine Small of Endeavours Together, a consultant on the project. That project encompasses some nine counties.

Efforts to restore Charlotte Harbor should begin in the upper Peace River, said Britt.

"Not only are we the top of the Peace watershed, but we're also the top of the aquifer," he said. He was referring to the fact the aquifer in the lakes region is located at a higher elevation, so, it helps maintain aquifer levels throughout Southwest Florida.

Britt pointed out, however, the flow of the upper Peace has declined by some 43 percent. Much of the decline stems from 45 miles of drainage canals dredged in the early 1900s. Also, cities sprouted up and that paved over aquifer recharge areas.

"Why don't we think about how to change that water budget?" he said.

He cited one project, the Circle B, in which public and private partners restored wetlands in order to filter stormwater from Winter Haven. Imagine a dozen such projects in the upper Peace watershed, Britt said.

Morris, of Wildlands Conservation, cited a map of public lands within the Peace River watershed. The map was contained within the state's 2007 Peace River Cumulative Impact Study. The map shows a "serious lack of conservation lands in the Peace River watershed," she said.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection owns or controls some 49,000 acres in Polk and Hardee counties. Some of those lands are former phosphate mines that have been placed within in an Integrated Habitat Network.

The Wildlands group is hoping to add to that by contacting landowners along the Peace River in DeSoto County, Sumpter said. Options for acquisitions range from state purchases through Florida Forever to developer incentives, he said.

"I think the regional approach is the only approach that will work," said audience member Jim Thompson, executive director of the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center, when asked for his reaction. "You also need to bring all the players together.

"You can't accomplish anything if all these entities are working alone in their little silos," he pointed out. The summit, which runs from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m. today, resumes with a talk on the vulnerability of marshes to climate change.

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