

Study: Estero Bay watershed lost 6.5 percent of wetlands in a year

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Originally published 02:20 p.m., January 26, 2008

Updated 02:20 p.m., January 26, 2008

A new Estero Bay watershed study shows a dismal environmental future if the way development permits are reviewed isn't changed.

An assessment of the 345-square-mile watershed by Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council planner and former state biologist Jim Beever says more than 25 percent of the watershed is already developed, and a recent 12-month period saw a decrease in wetlands within the watershed of 6.4 percent.

That's 3,755 acres of wetlands in 2006 that agencies like the South Florida Water Management District, the Department of Environmental Protection and the Corps of Engineers allowed to be destroyed.

"There are major gaps and problems in protecting the Estero Bay watershed from degradation in hydrology, water quality, wetland and upland habitats and general quality of life," Beever concludes.

Of the upland acres reviewed for development, 90 percent were permitted, he said.

"At this rate, the watershed will have exceeded the projected 2050 build-out scenario envisioned in the Lee County Comprehensive Plan before the year 2025," he said.

Cullum Hasty is a local environmentalist who sits on the Bontia Springs Local Planning Agency, the Estero Bay Agency on Bay Management, the Conservation 2020 land-buying committee and Lee County's Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area committee.

He said he's seen the changes in the watershed, but seeing them detailed is still a shock.

"There's 6 1/2 percent lost in one year? We do that for 10 years in a row and then where are we?" he asked. "It is startling."

Wayne Daltry is Smart Growth director for Lee County government and a county expert in growth management and water.

"It is grim," he said. "Our permitting and management efforts are not what we want

them to be."

Daltry said one of the findings that bothers him is that mitigation for destroyed wetlands most often takes place outside the watershed and even outside the county. For destroying 3,755 acres of wetlands, developers were required to create 1,016 acres of wetlands, but outside the watershed.

The study focused on 371 Environmental Resource Permits reviewed by the South Florida Water Management District between May 2006 and June 2007. The applications covered 16,014 acres. Two were denied, three were withdrawn and 306 were approved. The rest are pending.

"It's an abomination," said Lee Commission Chairman Ray Judah of the permitting results. "There's no question the agencies have not been firm in their resolve to protect wetlands. Permitting is much too lax."

Win Everham is a professor of environmental studies at Florida Gulf Coast University and co-chair of the Agency for Bay Management. He said what Beever found was no surprise, and has been discussed at length by the agency.

"We've said for a long time we need energy put on trying to track the changes," he said. "When you're standing in the middle of it, sometimes it's hard to follow."

Everham said the wetland destruction numbers didn't surprise him, but they're scary.

"It's scary to see that," he said. "But I wasn't surprised. Those things have been going on since I got here."

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