

This is one 'improvement' lagoon can do without

■ FIND shouldn't destroy existing seagrasses just for bigger boats

Kudos to Capt. Paul Dritenbas, Indian River County's newly appointed Florida Inland Navigation District commissioner, for wanting to preserve our county's last (and best) seagrass beds surrounding the Oslo boat ramp.

"It's not a space for large boats to try to launch," Dritenbas is quoted as saying in a June 20 story in this newspaper.

Dritenbas, a fishing guide, is resisting pressure from our local politicians and representatives, all of whom want a dredge and fill project at the Oslo boat ramp. This site has the most valuable and healthy seagrass beds remaining in our county. Dritenbas stated he will vote against this unnecessary funding from FIND and has the full support of small-boat fishermen, Save the Manatee Club, Marine Resources Council, Sierra Club, Audubon, and federal and state agencies.

FIND commissioners from outside our county should heed Dritenbas' experience here by following his lead. Our sensitive, poorly flushed lagoon differs from other counties and must be handled carefully to avoid further damage.



GUEST COLUMNIST

We appreciate FIND's efforts to use our tax money, keep our dredged channels open for boaters and spending our money to restore old fish houses and piers, but not for:

■ Dredging into a Florida aquatic preserve and a federal shellfish area, endangering the best seagrass nursery for our important fishing industry.

■ Covering and destroying mangrove fish habitat with a parking lot.

■ Widening and paving an existing road encroaching upon the best county-owned conservation lands purchased with taxpayers' money.

The federal government has declared that the project has "substantial and unacceptable adverse impacts on aquatic resources of national importance." The project even goes against the county's Manatee Protection Plan and is counterproductive toward

efforts to save our dying lagoon.

One reason why the seagrasses are healthy around the Oslo boat ramp is the area was never dredged and is surrounded by mangroves. Fishermen have used the site for years. They do not need an expanded paved county road that will destroy fish nurseries. The presence of rock between the ramp and the Intracoastal Waterway poses a safety hazard for big boats. Thus, dredging is a waste of money.

County officials incorrectly state that the road produces muck. The seagrasses, fish, and birds are still abundant there after 50-plus years of use of the existing road. Existing muck was caused by the recent ramp replacement, which was dredged for 25 feet. Now, surrounding muck debris collects there, unnaturally, as this dredging will do.

The parking area is in good condition with plenty of room for parked vehicles and passing traffic. Because small-boat and wading fishermen are catching fish there, the county, FIND and permitting agencies really have had a hard time justifying

that this project will improve it.

The county has more than twice the number of public boat ramp lanes needed to meet levels of service recommended by the state Department of Environmental Protection, including a large boat launch at MacWilliams Park, only six miles (or 14 minutes) from Oslo Road.

However, if the county needs another boat ramp on the west side of the lagoon, there is another county-owned alternative site twice as large at 45th Street with the following advantages:

■ Fewer seagrass and mangroves.

■ It's not in a federal shellfish or conservation area.

■ It would be less expensive to build.

■ It's closer to the Intracoastal Waterway.

Thank you, Commissioner Dritenbas, for voting against this ill-conceived project to ensure we do not destroy our best seagrasses and fishing nurseries at this critical time for our lagoon.

Richard Baker is president of the Pelican Island Audubon Society.