Wetlands are areas where water covers the ground or is near the surface for at least part of the year. Different sources use different definitions but the common feature is water and wet soil. Sound like your yard about now?

June through November is considered our wet season. You may realize this coincides with hurricane season when tropical low pressure areas often bring us wet storms and hurricanes such as Isidore. Summer breezes off shore bring moist air that heats up as it passes over the land. Huge rising clouds of water vapor tower into the air then rise to cooler atmospheric temperatures dropping loads of moisture nearly every afternoon.

The rainy season is nature's way of replenishing our thirsty soil and keeping wetlands wet. Florida has more wetlands than any other state in the continental US except Alaska. Half of our State threatened and endangered species live at least part of their life cycle in wetlands and 1/3 live only in wetlands.

Officials estimate that more than ½ of our original wetlands have been lost due to land conversion. During the time period from 1986-1997, wetlands were lost at a rate of about 58,000 acres annually, an 80% reduction over the previous decade. Legislation, incentive programs and responsible land stewardship are responsible for the change.

Lakes which drain our watershed and their surrounding wetlands provide recreational opportunities and important wildlife habitat. Lakes and wetlands serve as reservoirs and reducing flooding by holding stormwater runoff and releasing it over time. Florida is recognized as the Fishing Capitol of the World and Osceola County certainly has some of the best bass, bream and speck fishing in the State. Families love to boat on our waterways.

Approximately 12% of our county is covered in large lakes. The Florida Lakes and Gazetteer indicated 123 lakes greater than 40 acres in size in Osceola County. In 1969, these large lakes covered more than 117,000 acres of our county. Additional lowlands and wetlands comprise a major portion of the county.

Since 1969, channelization of the Kissimmee River and other drainage canals for flood control and water management, changes in weather and conversion of land from woodlands to agriculture and development have all had an impact on reducing the number and types of wetlands in our county. Where are we to grow?

Osceola County planners, businesses, consultants and concerned citizens are looking at where and how to grow as we increase in population. As various elements of the draft comprehensive plan are developed, they are being placed on the Osceola County website at osceola.org. More information on wetlands can be found at EPA's website at http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/

Several state agencies are involved in a plan to manage Lake Tohopekaliga for fisheries habitat. Plans have been in the works for several years to conduct a drawdown to allow part of the shallow lake bottom to dry out. This provides an opportunity to scrape away some of the organic matter that has accumulated as a result of flood control measures and the resulting stable water levels. The drawdown is scheduled to begin sometime in November, 2002.

Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society is holding an educational forum on the proposed drawdown of Lake Tohopekaliga (Toho). The forum is free and open to the public. If you want to know more about what a drawdown is, how it works, what it seeks to accomplish and more, you are encouraged to attend this forum.

It is being held on Tuesday evening, September 24th from 6:45 PM to 9 PM at the main branch of the
Osceola County Library on Dakins Avenue in downtown Kissimmee. The panel will consist of speakers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, The Army Corps of Engineers, the environmental community and the boating and fishing community. There will be a question and answer period.

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