

June 1st, 2021

Colonel Andrew Kelly
District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District
Jacksonville, FL 32207

Dear Colonel Kelly:

As the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers defines the parameters for a new operational schedule for Lake Okeechobee between now and July 2021, the undersigned urge you to adopt a more equitable operational plan that strives to send the maximum amount of water to the Everglades, Everglades National Park, and Florida Bay during the dry season and eliminate harmful discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and the Lake Worth Lagoon.

A restored Everglades is essential for the drinking water supply for more than 9 million Floridians, critical to the health of diverse ecosystems and the environmental benefits they provide, and directly supports Florida's outdoor recreation, tourism, real estate, and other sectors that define the Sunshine State's \$1 Trillion GDP, its economic competitiveness, and quality of life. Florida's economy runs on water and the Everglades economy that it drives sustains a \$85.9 billion tourism industry, including an \$11 billion fishing industry, a \$23.3 billion recreational boating industry, and hundreds of thousands of jobs.

We urge you to adopt an improved version of Plan CC from the Iteration 2 Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) alternatives that includes the following goals:

- Adjust the modelling for Plan CC to include an environmental demand for water in the Everglades so that water will be sent south in all operational bands from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades and increase dry season flows above volumes provided by LORS 2008 (Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule).
- Eliminate regulatory releases to the St. Lucie.
- Eliminate harmful regulatory releases to the Caloosahatchee while maintaining beneficial dry season releases, targeting RECOVER restoration flows of 750-2,100 cfs at S-79 whenever possible.
- Measure all Caloosahatchee flows at the S-79 (Franklin Lock) and reduce "up to" discharges in the upper bands (Zone B and Zone C) to no more than 4500 cubic feet per second.
- Minimize regulatory releases to the Lake Worth Lagoon.
- Add operational flexibility to avoid discharge to the estuaries when cyanotoxin levels exceed the Environmental Protection Agency's established guidelines for recreational exposure.

By making these modifications, it will decrease the likelihood of toxic discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, ensure the primary water supply for millions of Floridians along the Lower East Coast that depend on the Biscayne Aquifer, provide dry season hydration to the Central Everglades and Everglades National Park, reduce the risk of wildfires, minimize recreational closures, protect remaining carbon stocks across this vast peatland, and help to mitigate hyper-salinity in Florida Bay.

We recognize that the state has a role to play in sending Lake Okeechobee water south to the Stormwater Treatment Areas. The South Florida Water Management District controls three of the six primary outflows from the lake (S354, S351, S352), and the Army Corps of Engineers controls the other three (S308, S77, S271). Both agencies must work in tandem to achieve a LOSOM that protects public health, natural systems and stakeholders.

Thank you for your efforts to develop an equitable and truly balanced operational plan for Lake Okeechobee. This water belongs to all Floridians, and optimizing freshwater flows during the dry season will expedite restoration benefits, aid in conservation efforts on federal lands, and protect the largest constituencies and economies in the watershed.

Very Respectfully,

Congressman Brian Mast
18th District of Florida

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