



Everglades Coalition

1000 Friends of Florida
Arthur R. Marshall Foundation
Audubon Florida
Audubon Society of the Everglades
Audubon of Southwest Florida
Caloosahatchee River Citizens
Association / Riverwatch
Clean Water Action
Clean Water Network
Collier County Audubon Society
Conservancy of Southwest Florida
Defenders of Wildlife
Ding Darling Wildlife Society
Earthjustice
Environment Florida
The Environmental Coalition
Everglades Coordinating Council
Everglades Foundation
Everglades Law Center
Florida Conservation Alliance
Florida Defenders of the Environment
Florida Keys Environmental Fund
Florida Native Plant Society
Florida Oceanographic Society
Florida Wildlife Federation
Friends of the Arthur R. Marshall
Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge
Friends of the Everglades
Hendry Glades Audubon Society
Izaak Walton League Florida Division
Izaak Walton League Florida Keys Chapter
Izaak Walton League Mangrove Chapter
Izaak Walton League of America
Last Stand
League of Women Voters of Florida
Loxahatchee River Coalition
Martin County Conservation Alliance
National Audubon Society
National Parks Conservation Association
National Wildlife Federation
National Wildlife Refuge Association
Natural Resources Defense Council
The Ocean Conservancy
The Pegasus Foundation
REEF RELIEF
Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation
Save It Now, Glades!
Sierra Club
Sierra Club Broward Group
Sierra Club Calusa Group
Sierra Club Central Florida Group
Sierra Club Florida Chapter
Sierra Club Loxahatchee Group
Sierra Club Miami Group
The Snook and Gamefish Foundation
South Florida Audubon Society
Tropical Audubon Society
The Urban Environment League
World Wildlife Fund

August 22, 2013

Senator Joe Negron, Chair
Senator Charles S. Dean, Sr., Vice Chair
Senator Bill Montford, Vice Chair
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Senator Alan Hays
Senator Arthenia L. Joyner
Senator Maria Lorts Sachs

Dear Members of the Senate Select Committee on Indian River Lagoon and Lake Okeechobee Basin:

The Everglades Coalition, an alliance of 57 local, regional, state, and national conservation organizations, is dedicated to full restoration of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem from the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes south of Orlando to Lake Okeechobee and to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, through the River of Grass out to Biscayne and Florida Bays and ultimately to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. More than any one single organization, our membership has experience with and fully understands the grand scale of the problem you are tasked with investigating. Collectively we represent millions of members who work, live and recreate within the Greater Everglades Ecosystem whose quality of life and local economies have been negatively impacted by Lake Okeechobee management issues.

Solutions contemplated by this committee must address the problem holistically in order to be effective and not shift the problems from one natural system to another. Therefore we request that the scope and name of the committee include the Caloosahatchee as it is the single largest discharge point for excess flows.

Our recommendations:

*** Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP):** CEPP is the first major step towards restoring the heart of the Everglades. This Army Corps of Engineers project will benefit the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers by reducing fresh-water discharges during high and low flow events. It will bring 200,000 acre-feet of clean and "new" water to the Central Everglades and feed the depleted aquifers while providing significant benefits to estuaries around the greater Everglades. The Central Everglades project removes more than 25 miles of canals and levees. It eliminates much of the Miami Canal and creates a path of sheet flow across the L-67 canals toward a 2.6 mile bridge over Tamiami Trail.

We recommend:

-Support CEPP authorization in the next Water Resources Development Act.

* **Tamiami Trail:** The elevation of Tamiami Trail is critical to relieving discharges into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers. The National Park Service is moving forward on a plan to bridge 5.5 miles of Tamiami Trail in addition to the one-mile bridge opened this year. With secured funding, groundbreaking on a 2.6-mile span could be started in 2015.

We recommend:

- Support the \$30 million for Tamiami Trail bridging in the Interior Appropriations Bill
- Recommend RESTORE Act funding for Tamiami Trail bridging.

* **C-43 Reservoir:** The C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir is a needed component of Caloosahatchee watershed storage to improve the timing and volume of freshwater flows to the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. The state and federal governments will share the project costs equally.

We recommend:

- Support C-43 authorization and appropriations in the next Water Resources Development Act.
- Seek additional funding through the RESTORE Act to finance this project.

* **C-44 Reservoir and Stormwater Treatment Area:** These restorations projects will reduce harmful freshwater outflows and generate habitat and water quality improvements in the St. Lucie Estuary and the Indian River Lagoon.

We recommend:

- The State should to continue support and expedite the construction phase of this project, while including it in the State and Federal appropriations.

* **Kissimmee River Restoration:** Completing this project will add about 100,000 acre-feet of storage potential to the watershed, much of it by raising the levels of Lakes Kissimmee, Cypress and Hatchinehaw another 1.5 feet.

We recommend:

- The SFWMD should work with the Corps to revise the regulation schedule to store more water in the newly restored Kissimmee River floodplain.

***Herbert Hoover Dike Repair:** The Herbert Hoover Dike surrounds Lake Okeechobee and prevents it from flooding adjacent farms and cities. It also is more than 70 years old and weakened enough that the Lake's water levels cannot be allowed to reach more than about 17 feet for safety reasons. This limitation, combined with the drainage-enhanced rapid inflows into the lake from upstream, spurs frequent, maximum dumps to the estuaries.

We recommend:

- *The US Army Corps of Engineers expedite efforts to reinforce the dike to reduce the threat of flooding. Once finished, releases from Lake Okeechobee will be able to be made with environmental considerations, rather than emergency-driven massive releases.*
- *Incorporate a spillway in the next phase of the dike reinforcement located in the south/southwest portion of the Dike to serve as an emergency relief valve for the system.*

*** Numeric Nutrient Criteria:** In collaboration with the Rick Scott administration, the U.S. EPA is currently asking the Court for permission to leave the following Florida water bodies without any nutrient pollution limits: all intermittent streams, all canals, all tidal creeks, all flowing waters that have been physically altered and are used for water management, and all South Florida flowing waters. Together these exceptions would account for two thirds of all Florida flowing waters. With specific regard to the pollution entering Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, the major fraction comes from tributaries in the Northern Everglades; most of those tributaries would be exempted from protection. In as much, downstream waterbodies, drinking water supplies, waterfront economies, and public health are left unprotected and unrestored. Without hard limits, pollution discharges cannot be effectively controlled.

We recommend:

- Set hard limits for nitrogen and phosphorous for all Florida waters.

***Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program:** The Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program is the mechanism under Florida Law to reduce nutrient pollution through the Northern Everglades watershed, and sets forth a variety of water storage and water quality projects and programs to help reduce the inflow of nitrogen and phosphorus into the ecosystem. However, phosphorus and nitrogen continue to enter the watershed from wastewater, urban stormwater, farm fertilizers and animal feed. The Lake Okeechobee water quality goal is routinely exceeded by a 400%. Plans for reducing nutrients in the estuaries have only recently been established and will have limited effect.

We recommend:

- *Aggressive new state rules to require improved treatment of urban stormwater, all sources of wastewater including septic tanks, reclaimed water used for landscape irrigation, and sewage sludge.*
- *Agricultural practices, including the use of fertilizers, meet a standard of “no harm to water quality” - the state needs to update Best Management Practice rules to significantly reduce the amount of phosphorus and nitrogen from fertilizer and animal feed and manure added to the watershed.*

*** BMPs, ERPs/development, and wetland relevance:** “Lake Okeechobee water level problems are ultimately traceable to huge wetland losses historically and currently in the watershed. Coupled with poor agricultural and stormwater practices, including the unmonitored presumption of compliance with water quality standards afforded agricultural producers, the result is enormous amounts of dirty water.

We recommend:

- *Wetland restoration and protection through a combination of incentives, acquisition, pay for services, public restoration, and enforced regulations, including monitored and enforced mandatory, site specific Best Management Practices (BMPs) for agriculture and stormwater, and better adherence to Florida’s ‘no net loss of wetlands’ policy.”*

*** Urban Fertilizer Management/Septic Tanks:** Stringent urban fertilizer management ordinances allow a growing number of local governments to utilize additional “policy tools” to improve water quality at a local level. The regulation of septic tank maintenance is another tool that could be used to stop pollution at its source. Preemption of the use of these “policy tools” leaves local governments with only the most expensive infrastructure alternatives to reduce the flow of nutrient pollution into our beleaguered water resources. Nowhere is this need more apparent than the St. Lucie Estuary and the Indian River Lagoon region, but there is no region of Florida that has escaped the negative impacts of fertilizer, sewage and animal manure pollution.

We recommend:

- *Reject and reverse any legislative action to preempt local government regulation of pollution source controls including urban fertilizer management and septic tank maintenance.*

*** Dispersed Water Management/Water Farming:** Unused private, public and agricultural land could provide additional storage capacity to reduce flows from the over-drained Lake Okeechobee watershed.

We recommend:

- *Explore and assess this program for its potential to store more water in a cost-effective way.*

***Lake Okeechobee Water Levels:** Public safety, agricultural water supply, estuary salinity management, and fish and wildlife protection determine Lake Okeechobee water levels. Those are targeted between 12.5 and 15.5 feet, with some room for flexibility during the peaks and valleys of the wet and dry season. The Lake cannot be held too high without substantially increasing the risk of a breach to the levee and damage to the critical lake marsh that serves as the lungs and kidneys of the lake.

We recommend:

- Improve agricultural water conservation to reduce the need to manage the lake as a reservoir for water supply needs.
- Institute policy changes to provide adequate dry season and drought water supply to support the Caloosahatchee Estuary.

Transparency: Public understanding of agency initiatives, projects and policies is critical in order to inform and gain support of the taxpaying public. Currently there is very little transparency in the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) planning and decision-making process.

We recommend:

- A webpage be dedicated to a comprehensive list of projects within the various watersheds, to provide easily accessible details with regard to the storage capacity and cost per acre foot, the breadth of actions being pursued, additional storage capacities within the system, and a clear quantification of storage shortfalls.

Thank you for considering our recommendations.

Please also consider our member organizations as sources of information, experience and expertise with regard to the above recommendations. We would be honored to be of assistance to the Select Committee.

Sincerely,

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