

DRAFT Meeting Summary
Joint Working Group and Science Coordination Group
Meeting Summary
January 16, 2024

Note: This is a summary of the major highlights for the January 16th Joint WG/SCG meeting. The most accurate source and official record for the meeting is the digital recording of the meeting which is readily available and posted for viewing on the OERI website at www.evergladesrestoration.gov and also available at: [EvergladesRestoration.gov - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

1. Welcome and Introductions

James Erskine called the meeting called to order at 10:02AM. Lawrence Glenn, Angie Dunn, and Nick Aumen provided some introductory remarks. Nick noted the last item on the agenda is to discuss future science topics. They have talked about devoting more time to science and he encouraged everyone to provide input. Marcel Bozas participating via ZOOM was welcomed as the new SCG member representing the Miccosukee Tribe and replacing Craig van der Heiden. Paul Linton alternate for Deb Drum was welcomed as was Governing Board member Dan Butler. Allyn Childress provided some administrative instructions regarding the ZOOM platform.

2. Member Whip-Around

Members were asked to provide brief introductory remarks. Among those remarks, it was noted that Task Force member Radhika Fox is leaving EPA at the end of February. Everyone was encouraged to attend the EAA Reservoir STA Ribbon Cutting Ceremony taking place on January 25th.

Working Group (WG) Members (√ denotes in person attendance)		Alternate
James Erskine – Chair – FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	√	
Nick Aumen – Vice Chair – U.S. Geological Survey	√	
Becky Allenbach – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	ZOOM	
Karen Bohnsack – NOAA, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary	√	
COL James Booth – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	-	Gina Ralph
Adam Brame – NOAA, National Marine Fisheries Service	ZOOM	
Wes Brooks – Florida Statewide Office of Resilience	ZOOM	
Amy Castaneda – Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida	ZOOM	
Deb Drum – Palm Beach County	-	Paul Linton
Rebecca Elliott – FL Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services	√	
Veronica Harrell-James – U.S. Attorney’s Office	√	
John Maehl – Martin County Board of County Commissioners	ZOOM	
Roland Ottolini – Lee County Division of Natural Resources	√	
Pedro Ramos – South Florida National Parks and Preserve	√	
Leonard Rawlings – Bureau of Indian Affairs	-	
Jennifer Reynolds – South Florida Water Management District	√	
Whitney Sapienza – Seminole Tribe of Florida	-	
Edward Smith – Florida Department of Environmental Protection	ZOOM	
Joe Sullivan – U.S. Department of Transportation, FHWA	-	

Larry Williams – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	ZOOM
Vacant – FL Dept. of Transportation	-
Vacant – Miami-Dade County	-
Vacant – U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, NRCS	-
Adam Gelber – Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives	√
Science Coordination Group (SCG) Members	
Lawrence Glenn – SCG Chair – South Florida Water Management District	√
Angie Dunn – SCG Vice Chair – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	√
John Baldwin – Florida Atlantic University	-
Marcel Bozas – Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida	√
Joan Browder – NOAA, Southeast Fisheries Science Center	ZOOM
Jennifer Hecker – Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership	ZOOM
Bonnie Irving – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	ZOOM
Chris Kelble – NOAA, Atlantic Oceanographic Meteorological Laboratory	√
Chad Kennedy – FL Dept. of Environmental Protection	√
Gil McRae – FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	√
Holly Milbrandt – City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department	-
Mark Rains – Florida Department of Environmental Protection	ZOOM
Jed Redwine – Seminole Tribe of Florida	ZOOM
Stephanie Romañach – United States Geological Survey	√
Dan Scheidt – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	ZOOM
Erik Stabenau – National Park Service, South Florida Natural Resources	√
Jason Strenth – U.S. Department of Agriculture – NRCS	-
Vacant – FL Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	-
Vacant – U.S. Department of Agriculture – ARS	-

3. Approval of Meeting Summary

The September meeting summary was provided to the members. Chad Kennedy made a motion to approve which was seconded by Nick Aumen. There was no discussion. The September meeting summary was approved.

4. Executive Director’s Report

Adam Gelber noted the next Task Force meeting is scheduled for April 25th in south Florida. He provided an update on those items the Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) is working on that include:

- Following up on the proposed amendments to the WG and SCG charters which are pending Task Force approval.
- Working on the Task Force reports which include the 2024 Biennial Report, 2024 Integrated Financial Plan and the 2025 Cross Cut Budget.
- Working with the Invasive Species Advisory Body which has provided its first work product, the Invasive Species Priority Prevention List and Recommendations Information Sheet. The advisory body has kicked off the science-based prioritization process for EDRR and established species which include an assessment of key indicators of restoration success. They will continue working on

recommendations regarding detection and response and will revisit the prevention list with the same assessment process. Their next meeting is on Jan 31st.

Laura Brandt noted she has been coordinating the ecological indicator aspects that are included in the Task Force's Biennial Report and in the stand-alone report, the Systemwide Ecological Indicators for Everglades Restoration, since 2012. She will be working with Marsha Bansee from OERI to incorporate the ecological responses throughout the report as well as in the Restoration Science section instead of having it as an appendix. They want to characterize the projects by status towards completion and be more explicit about the discussion of ecological responses at the project level and link that with what is going on in the entire ecosystem. The information will be more comprehensive and show how their investments are leading to these ecological outcomes. This year there will not be a stand-alone indicator report because RECOVER is doing their 5-year report and a lot of that information overlaps. There are also several other reports such as the Combined Operational Plan Biennial Report and the South Florida Environmental Report that will in some way speak to the ecological success of restoration.

5. USACE Program and Project Update

Eva Velez reviewed the program structure and reminded everyone that everything they do from a programming, funding, and implementation perspective starts with the federal C&SF project. The FY24 execution focus includes program level activities and projects in planning, design and construction, and operations and management. She highlighted the 2024 priorities which include:

1. Award five construction contracts totaling ~ \$3.1 billion for:
 - a. Embankment for EAA Reservoir,
 - b. IRL South C-23/C-24 North Reservoir,
 - c. Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP) South S-356 Pump Station,
 - d. CEPP South S-355 West Spillway, and
 - e. Broward County WPA C-11 Impoundment
2. Prepare four documents for the Congress to consider for inclusion in WRDA 2024:
 - a. Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP),
 - b. Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP) Wetlands Report,
 - c. Support South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) with Section 203 Lake Okeechobee Component A Reservoir (LOCAR), and
 - d. Update to the total project cost for Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (BBCW).
3. Realize ecosystem benefits through operations such as completing LOSOM.
4. Advance the next generation of projects such as BBSEER and the C&SF Section 216 Study.
5. Communicate openly with sponsors, partners, Tribes, and stakeholders.
6. Maintain visibility on cost through design and construction.

The annual appropriation for FY24 along with FY23 carryover is \$507 million along with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (2022) funds of \$1.097 billion, they are well positioned to execute all their priorities this year. The challenge they will encounter in 2024 is the competitive market for solicitation and bidding. One of their goals is to partner with industry in a way that is more transparent.

6. SFWMD Update

Mindy Parrott reminded everyone they are the nonfederal sponsor with the Corps on the CERP and Foundation Projects. In addition, the SFWMD is working on several state and local projects that include Restoration Strategies, Northern Everglades and Estuaries Program, Dispersed Water Management, and other local projects. She highlighted all the work accomplished in 2023 and noted that 2024 will be a busy year. In 2024, they will complete construction on the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Stormwater Treatment Area (STA), CEPP New Water Seepage Barrier (5 miles), and CEPP North S-620. They will also start construction on the:

- EAA A-2 Reservoir Pump Station and Canal Conveyance Improvements,
- Indian River Lagoon – South (IRL-S) C-23/24 South Reservoir and C-25 Reservoir & STA,
- Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (BBCW) Contract 6B,
- Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) L-28 South Gated Culverts, and
- CEPP North S-8 Pump Station Modifications Phase 1.

The SFWMD is also working on three planning studies (LOCAR, WERP, LOWRP) for inclusion in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2024. Everyone was invited to participate in the EAA Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on January 25th to celebrate the completion of Cell 1 in the STA

7. Florida's Coral Reef Coordination Team (FCRCT)

Erik Stabenau provided an update on the team which held its kick-off meeting in February 2023 and a series of regular meetings throughout 2023. The team has developed a database of relevant water quality and related monitoring programs and finalized the monitoring framework document that outlines priorities and action items. Next steps include continue working on action plans identified in the framework and coordinate with the Florida's Coral Reef Resilience Program's Water Quality Team. The next meeting is scheduled for March 2024.

Pedro Ramos suggested the team consult/interact with neighboring countries in the Caribbean that are dealing with the same problems and possibly include them in an advisory role to the team. Erik noted the NPS works with the park units in the Caribbean. Wes Brooks added that the Coral Reef Disease Team through the State of Florida and NOAA has been taking a leadership role in ensuring those partnerships with their Caribbean and Pacific partners are in the works. They did not anticipate doing this with the FCRCT. Gil McRae added the State of Florida does have a Caribbean Coordination Team set up as part of the response framework to the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD).

8. Restoration Coordination and Verification (RECOVER) – 2024 System Status Report

Phyllis Klarmann noted the CERP Programmatic Regulations require RECOVER prepare the System Status Report (SSR), a technical report, no less than every five years on whether the goals and the purposes of the CERP, including the interim goals and interim targets, are being achieved or are likely to be achieved. The RECOVER Monitoring and Assessment Plan (MAP) is the primary tool by which they are observing changes in the ecosystem. To date they have prepared five SSRs. In 2019, they also created a high-level communication document called the Everglades Report Card. All previous reports were based on an ecosystem where CERP projects were not yet in the ground. This time around they are in a position where there are several project components that are operational. There have also been changes in operational plans such as LOSOM and COP. Because they are in a new phase of the CERP, they are

trying to figure out how to best communicate this information. The current SSR will focus on its audience (Congress, agency leadership, and CERP Project Managers) and not be so highly technical. It will be heavy with graphics and contain short summaries. The reporting period for the current SSR will be water year (WY) 2018 through WY 2024 (May 1, 2017 through April 30, 2024). With the goal of minimizing effort and maximizing overall communication, RECOVER will coordinate with parallel reporting efforts that include:

- 2024 SFERTF Biennial Report to Congress,
- Combined Operations Plan Biennial Report,
- Everglades National Park World Heritage Report,
- 2025 South Florida Environmental Report, and
- CERP 2025 Five-Year Report to Congress.

Phyllis explained that the period of record is now 52 years. RECOVER has identified this as a need in general. RECOVER is trying to identify those key uncertainties in the system that the models are not able to show them such as climate change and an increase in the incidence and magnitude of tropical storm events. BBSEER, for example, is incorporating sea level rise with a resiliency performance measure. The second periodic CERP update is including a future with CERP with sea level rise scenarios. CERP is starting to move in the right direction by incorporating that information. This SSR will look at whether interim goals and targets are likely to be achieved. The SSR will also emphasize the need to develop additional modeling tools.

Laura Brandt added that to have those conversations they will need people with dedicated time to think through what it will take for them to be able to answer those questions. They have record dollars going into construction, but they don't have record resources going into the science.

9. Open Discussion on future Science Topics

Lawrence Glenn thanked his co-chairs for adding RECOVER as a standing agenda item. RECOVER has presented to the Task Force which has provided the opportunity for scientists to practice communicating with non-scientists. It has also provided the opportunity for science to say they have unmet needs in staffing and funding. The state has stepped up to provide \$2.5 million through the SFWMD for RECOVER. Sound science is needed at every step of these large restoration projects. This portion of the agenda will be devoted to hearing about what the science needs are. Angie Dunn said that in addition to topics that need to be reported on to the WG/SCG they would like to know which topics they would like to have a focused SCG meeting on. Nick Aumen said it would be good to do the brainstorming and then come up with a priority list.

Nick Aumen noted that back in 2015 when they did a series of papers on environmental management, they took a climate change scenario and ran it through the SFWMM to look at the impacts on rainfall, canal flow, etc., and the one thing that scared them was that under one scenario with warmer climate, they had 10% less rainfall, in model world they had Lake Okeechobee being at 5 feet for 3-4 years. That made them realize the importance of the water budget in restoration. It is possible that this part of south Florida may get drier, or they may have wetter dry seasons. He would like to hear an update followed by a discussion on where they are on the modeling and analyses related to long-term precipitation patterns which is central to restoration planning.

Stephanie Romañach suggested they look at transitions and what it is that they expect in year 1, 2, 3 rather than in 50 years. They need to know whether they are headed in the right direction. How do they expect the system to respond ecologically? What can they realistically expect? With respect to climate change, they will be in a tough situation if they are just thinking about the past. They need to think about what they expect the hydrologic future will look like. Think about what happens when those habitats are transitioning, what is the tolerance of salinity for plants, what will the responses be like. There is research and monitoring ongoing and perhaps they can synthesize that. Also, every decision maker will have their own level of risk tolerance. What are the levels of certainty from these outcomes? Are they setting realistic expectations? In addition, they need to look at technology and whether there are more efficient or effective ways to look at things in addition to the field work.

Chris Kelble said it would be useful to know what is it that they, as scientists, know they are not doing a good enough job on in the Everglades, as Nick pointed out rainfall. They know sea level rise is happening and will have massive impacts on Everglades restoration. He suggested they should put their heads together as to where they should be 5 years from now.

Erik Stabenau added they are already seeing changes on the landscape related to sea level rise and will likely see changes due to water availability. For their projects, they are still defining the geographical locations and he believes they need to discuss the framework for how they do performance metrics. How do they deal with a moving future and a shoreline that is moving on them?

Chad Kennedy noted they are building a lot of projects with components such as ASR wells and reservoirs. For him, talking about some of the features they are already building and looking at what they can learn from other regions and other projects that are similar would add value. They are building a complex system that will rely on technology and it would be helpful to get up to speed on the latest and greatest technology.

Gil McRae, on precipitation patterns, pointed to the last couple of weeks and what is supposed to be happening versus what is happening. If the fundamental seasonality changes, which seems possible if not likely, then a whole lot of things need to be recalibrated. Figuring out what they can put into predicting precipitation patterns as detailed as possible is a good investment. When they talk about ecological responses there is massive retooling of a large landscape. They can identify the best-case scenario for ecological response and that is what they tend to do because it is tough to predict. However, there is a range of ecological responses that are likely to happen, some good and some not so good. For example, if they get the freshwater inflow right and the salinity regimes squared away on the East Coast, it does not mean oysters are going to come back quickly or at all. The same is true for seagrass beds in Florida Bay. Thinking about how they define ecological responses and investing in some work that talks about potential ranges of ecological responses and more importantly reporting out to the public about what they are seeing and what it might mean relative to success, short- versus long-term, is worth investing some time and energy.

Jennifer Reynolds noted a scientist at the last GEER Conference showed a diagram of the trajectory of a plan and how things change from the time a plan is first initiated. Outcomes need to be looked at not only in relation to a plan but in relationship to how reality has changed since the plan was first developed. This applies to the Everglades since they have a hard time talking to people about whether CERP is working and whether it is going to work under climate change and sea level rise. No one asks if CERP is going to work now that they have 12 million people in Florida and now that there is more

development than in 2000. Is CERP still going to work now that they are using more water, there is more irrigation, and other things have changed? They need to think through how they challenge themselves to talk about CERP in that construct and ask whether they are going to achieve what the Plan said it would achieve given these climate change, sea level rise, and precipitation. They need to look forward and, in some ways, they must look farther back than their period of record. They need to think about the geologic time series changes and look at what has happened to the Everglades over time to better describe what's going to happen to the Everglades in the future. All these things that have changed have move those dotted lines on the trajectory graph as well as the solid line which is the plan. They need to figure out how to communicate the science and think about the what ifs.

Lawrence Glenn added that the projects they work on are so long scale, the technology they have when they do the modeling and planning is different when they get to the end thirty years later. There is Adaptive Management that can help with that, but it is important to think about what is outside of science that impacts their ability to reach those goals. Sea level rise was not contemplated when CERP was written, and they must make sure the science that comes out of here is solid enough to potentially change policy to allow for inclusion of these new aspects they are finding on the forefront that might negatively impact their goal. If they see there is something that will impede their ability to reach the endpoint, then they can educate those that have provided the funding. Is there another project that gets authorized to make up that delta?

Nick Aumen explained that there are trajectories that natural systems take, and they need to take that into account as they move forward with what they are trying to do. The challenge is all these other forcing factors are human related and are happening faster than they thought they would.

Joan Browder said that in BBSEER's planning they are considering that there will be soil accretion in the mangrove fringe and that will hold back sea level rise from flooding the interior wetlands. They don't have to think only of the seawater area expanding because there could be other alternatives brought about by the ecology and hydrology and those are important things to think about. RECOVER and BBSEER have been going through the process of listing uncertainties. Those uncertainties are a good place to harvest science needs because science is what helps them deal with some of those uncertainties. Those uncertainties should be addressed when picking topics for science needs.

Bob Johnson pointed to the loss of water storage and the idea of water availability. Most know that the Yellow Book and the summary tables anticipated having millions of acre feet more water available in CERP than they have in the IDS today. Some of that is because of changes in new technology like ASR and some of it is because of legitimate concerns with high water conditions in areas like Lake Okeechobee and some of it is just because they haven't gotten to all the projects yet. The Second Periodic CERP Update will help them understand this better because they will have all the CERP components put into one model run. He is waiting to find out what they are going to do about the fact that the amount of water they anticipated having available is much less than when this project was laid out.

Gina Ralph noted the following items:

- CISRERP recommended a south Florida Science Plan.

- Harmful algal bloom tools are currently in the works with UF and other principal investigators and will help inform water management decisions. May be ready to bring to this group later in the year.
- Integrating climate change (precipitations, storm frequency, evapotranspiration, etc.) into modeling tools.
- Adaptive management options and strategies for climate adaptation and incorporation of nature-based features. Exploring novel and less cost-effective water quality treatment options for water reuse and water storage.
- Denise Reed at GEER gave a thought-provoking talk, sometimes “you have to actually crack some eggs to make some progress”, we may have some longstanding policy issues that are impeding in some areas of the system and maybe it’s time to bring those into the light.

Erik Stabenau noted that as a group they tend to think of an ecological element and a human element separately rather than as a merged environmental system. If there’s anything they’ve learned from their Tribal partners in the last few years is to stop thinking in such a compartmentalized way. They should be carefully considering both the natural and human influences in the discussion and in these other technical discussions.

Roland Ottolini said he is more interested in understanding ecological response to natural disasters like hurricanes. They suffered a lot of natural systems devastation and what does recovery look like or do they need restoration. He suspects ecosystems are resilient and can come back but with mortal blows they won’t. Is it one of those wait and see what returns or is there something they can do to supplement to get it back on its feet again?

Jen Reynolds, regarding levels of sensitivity to a certain scientific topic as it relates to their evaluation of its relevance to CERP and to decision making, some of the scientific things they are looking at are important and measurable but what is the level of sensitivity as it relates to CERP as compared to the level of sensitivity as it relates to sea level change, as an example, which they can’t control in CERP projects. There are things they can control and decisions that they can’t control. Some of those may be more important to the overall effect on the resource but it’s not sensitive to the decision that they need to make for CERP. Being able to tease that difference out is something they are going to need to continue to deal with.

Chris Kelble pointed to the coral world where they are doing a lot of assisted evolution and stress hardening in experimental facilities before putting it out in the wild. He is aware of research that’s climate related but not sure if there is anything similar for restoration or how it would play in the Everglades. When they started CERP they had this viewpoint that they don’t touch natural areas and they don’t interfere with them. Now they have realized this might be a method to take to get them to where they want them to be.

Rebecca Elliott noted there is going to be a rise in groundwater which will also impact fresh groundwater storage and flood risk as far as groundwater being higher. Fresh groundwater is predicted to be higher but also salty groundwater or brackish groundwater is also predicted to be higher so those interactions with saltwater intrusion and sea level rise with groundwater are important to try to understand.

James Erskine noted the topics mentioned by this group contain great things to examine. He developed his list which is organized in terms of agenda formation for the upcoming year which included:

- Corals, perhaps an update from their team to get a good view of the status of the system.
- Tree islands are a constant conversation across all the different planning efforts with a couple billion dollars of work going in and around the Everglades Wildlife Management Area. There are 2 or 3 different scientists looking at different metrics to develop performance measures. RECOVER has also held a workshop on this topic. He suggested bringing it to this group for a broader discussion and sharing of information.
- Climate change, having been brought up several times, James suggested a report-out on USGS' survey that was conducted as part of that climate change update.
- Water quality, specifically Lake Okeechobee and HABs, is another topic that can be discussed.

Jed Redwine reviewed his list of science needs for CERP which includes landscape scale plant community monitoring. Seminole Tribal members are concerned that medicinal organisms are harder and harder to find, mostly plants. They are seeing patch level extirpation of organisms and their patches are slowly becoming less diverse. They have had a historical challenge of systematizing a landscape scale vegetation monitoring process because it is challenging but it is important that they go forward and begin to understand how the engineered infrastructure that drives the system is influencing patch specific survivorship of plant species. If the landscape is becoming less and less diverse and they're not seeing it, it will be to their detriment and to the detriment of future generations. They need to get the obvious elements of a water budget on the table and every time they drain some place to protect a road, they need to calculate how much water storage is needed to offset. That needs to occur at every location where they are altering the water level, or they are delivering a level of flood protection. They need to understand how much storage they are losing and have a running tally of that. The highest priority issue for him going forward in his water quality program with the Seminole Tribe is cyanobacteria and the risk that they present to individual Tribal members – the relationship between the expression of cyanobacteria and the operations of Lake Okeechobee. The health of the littoral shelf in Lake Okeechobee, the probability of cyanobacteria blooms, the relationship between macronutrients, phosphorus, and nitrogen as well as inorganic nitrogen on the probability of cyanobacteria blooms. So, all the things that they can influence which are affecting the likelihood cyanobacteria is going to be expressed on the landscape. Unfortunately, these blooms have become frequent. What kind of bioaccumulation of toxins are they observing because of cyanobacteria? What are the food chain risks? What are the effects on recommendations of fish consumption rates for people who live by collecting their food from the landscape? It's unwise for them to take engineering dominated organizations and ask them to develop science programs. The people who manage the science programs need to be held accountable, but they need to have the basic skill set that allows them to effectively manage a science process. He noted his concern that they don't have that at this point.

Wes Brooks said there are a lot of things they don't understand about the system and probably won't for a very long time. The WG and SCG had a conversation a year ago about its role in support of this larger effort. To him, their role is to think about what the critical decisions are facing the Task Force and its member agencies this year, five years, ten years from now. If the WG and SCG are not setting the table for the Task Force and its member agencies to make decisions that lead them down whatever path they need to go down, he is not sure they are doing their job as well as they could be. That gets back to

prioritizing research decisions which fall back into the constraint of resource limitations. Everything they are doing is to get to some decision that is supposed to be better for the goals they have in place. He wondered whether it was worth them and the Task Force reiterating what those goals are and backing it up with whatever information is necessary to support those decisions. Uncertainty, whether its climate change or something else, is a key factor. Things they have a strong certainty with should go into building a plan or design. Sea level rise, from a climate perspective, would be one of those things that he thinks they have a good understanding of. Precipitation to him, as someone who looks at how they modify the built environment, is where they have a lot of uncertainty. They already have very high interannual variability across different portions of the system. There is a lot of discussion about which direction precipitation may trend for the region overall. They need to focus more on sensitivity analyses that might point to certain factors or things to keep an eye on. Rates are very important, and whether the rate of change they're expecting from any given factor is exceeding their ability to keep up with it or not. If it's not, he would treat that as less important in the grand scheme of what they are trying to do. Again, what are the goals of the Task Force and what decisions do they need to make.

Lawrence Glenn thanked everyone for bringing their ideas to the forefront. The Chairs will take these back and group them and send something back out to the group. They will try to come up with a priority order list. There will always be, at some level, questions facing them.

Public Comment

In-Person Commenters

Newton Cook (United Waterfowlers of Florida) noted that United Waterfowlers has been around for 20 years, and they started because the Everglades restoration was important for the ducks. Everything they do from Orlando to the Keys depends on the health of Lake Okeechobee. Today, purposely, and intentionally, they are killing Lake Okeechobee which is at 16 feet and going up. This is the dry season and lake levels are supposed to be going down. They are managing the lake under LOSOM which is a disaster and will prove to be a disaster for the Caloosahatchee and the St. Lucie rivers. He has a few years left and he would love to see Lake Okeechobee treated properly for once. They aren't doing restoration; they are just putting band-aids on a failed system.

Online Commenters

Ben Olson (resident), regarding WERP, at the CISRERP meeting the prior week, he pointed out to the scientists that were there that there are tens of thousands of acres of critical panther territory deliberately ignored in the WERP draft report. He also pointed out that just about every single endangered species on the list in the draft report is in the footprint that he is speaking on. He has read the draft report in its entirety and the only panther territory acknowledged by the Corps was the 3,700-acre North Feeder STA which they claim will have panther habitat units used to offset primary habitat destruction. When questioned about the West Feeder flooding, the Corps' reiterated that they worked in conjunction with FWS. The report never mentioned the roughly 35,000-acres they intend to flood under WERP let alone the additional acreage he contests will be flooded from incompetence. At the October 2023 FWS meeting for conservation easements in the region, FWS had zero knowledge of this flooding. His family land is priority one land and all the lands in this footprint were either priority one or two according to FWS modeling. Meanwhile, FWS is trying to get him and his neighbors to sell conservation easements. He asked who at FWS was consulted with pertaining to panthers and asked to be provided with the names of personnel at the meeting the following day. This plan no longer includes

water quality, and it abdicates that to the state. This plan cannot go into WRDA 2024 and must be significantly altered prior to the Chief's Report.

Kelli Ralston (Bonefish & Tarpon Trust (BTT)) commended the Corps and the SFWMD on the tremendous progress made on Everglades restoration due in part to the agencies working together and the record funding at the state and federal level. BTT supports the northern Lake Okeechobee projects as well as WERP for authorization in WRDA. They know there are still issues to work through with WERP, but they are confident they can keep those on track for authorization in 2024. They are also encouraged to hear the SFWMD and ERDC are working together to look at ASR technology, an important component of Everglades storage and restoration throughout the system, especially Lake Okeechobee. Understanding where they are environmentally in this process is becoming more important and as they move forward with projects. The science discussion was very informative. One thing that was helpful in securing the record funding for Everglades restoration projects was knowing what those financial needs were. As RECOVER becomes more and more essential to direct Everglades restoration projects, having an idea of what funding might be necessary from the state and federal levels helps them as stakeholders advocate for the science needs. As this group discusses science needs, she encouraged them to associate dollars with those needs.

Eileen Bicaba (President of the North Miami (NoMi) Property Owners Association) noted that within her area there are low lying areas that connect to the C-8 Canal that experience extreme flooding that completely bring the quality of life to a halt for homeowners. The City of North Miami promised to provide the drainage, there currently is no drainage. The SFWMD has previously said that there are challenges in absorbing more of the surrounding area called Annex Area 3 water into the C-8 Canal. She asked how the Everglades restoration project will influence the volume of water in the C-8 Canal and the City's ability to provide drainage to the residents in that area.

Nyla Pipes (resident) echoed the concerns with WERP, she still does not believe they are there as far as involving the people most directly affected let alone the concerns brought up regarding the panther and the other endangered species. She stands beside Newton Cook in his comments about Lake Okeechobee and the concerns with LOSOM. Based on the discussions at this meeting, she applauded them for bringing up the concerns about people. Development is currently outpacing restoration in every single corner of this state and it's becoming a big problem. Many tend to look the other way because development is literally how taxpayer dollars continue to flow in. They need to talk about the increased demand on water supply and how each development reduces their wetlands. It is an issue they need to tackle just as hard as they tackle things such as cyanobacteria.

Matthew Taylor (President of the Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League) noted he is a seventh generation Gladesman and a property owner within the Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP), Turner River Unit. He appreciates all the hard work on WERP, but he believes it is not ready for prime time and neither do any of the folks he knows. As proposed, the only folks that benefit from WERP are the folks north of I-75 except for some of the culverts that are going to be installed under US 41 and Loop Road. Those are the same culverts they were promised would be installed over 20 years ago. WERP is needed but not in the form it is currently in. He intends to fight the Wilderness Designation within BCNP. BCNP is a preserve and not a park and they cannot compare it to ENP and the work that's allegedly being done in ENP. History has shown them that areas designated as wilderness closes the blinds on the public's ability to see whether the property is being managed properly. Tom Forsyth, Superintendent at BCNP,

has done an outstanding job trying to control invasive exotic species such as Old-World Climbing Vine, Brazilian Pepper, and Melaleuca. The primary sponsor when it comes to controlling exotic plants is FWC and they are opposed to the Wilderness designation as are the Miccosukee Tribe and all the other Gladesmen and stakeholders that he knows.

Betty Osceola (Miccosukee Tribal member) thanked Jed for mentioning those concerns on behalf of the Seminole Tribal members which she wholeheartedly agrees with. They are seeing a lot of the medicinal plants and other items they use for traditional healing and ceremonies disappearing at an alarming rate because of the mismanagement of water. She does not support WERP and there are a lot of Tribal members who have not even heard of WERP. A letter may have been penned by Chairman Cypress, but he does not speak for every Native American in this state. She hopes the Corps holds a public meeting for Tribal members on WERP. They have also failed to speak to the descendants of the Seminoles and Miccosukees who call themselves The Independent Seminole Nation who are also entitled to know what is going on. On the Wilderness Designation, she along with other Tribal members have concerns about how that will impact their ability to access those areas they have accessed historically. There have been statements that exceptions will be made, but unfortunately when has any government agency kept their promises to the Indigenous Peoples. She urged them to have conversations with the actual Miccosukee and Seminole Tribal membership not just their employees.

Mike Elfenbein (Executive Director of the Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League) regarding the Wilderness Designation, he said that comments made at this meeting and comments sent via e-mail warrants this group having a discussion on Wilderness Designation. The State of Florida who is responsible for the fish and wildlife opposes the Wilderness Designation. He suggested that at the next SCG meeting, they propose a scientific study that either does or does not validate the need for a Wilderness Designation in BCNP. There is no way that the Indigenous Peoples in the State of Florida and the stakeholders would say that a Wilderness Designation is bad, yet you believe it is the greatest thing. He implored the group to discuss this issue since it will have significant detrimental impacts. Wilderness Designation has proven to be horrible for ENP and will be the same catastrophe for BCNP.

Next Steps and Closing Comments

James Erskine reminded everyone that the next WG/SCG meeting will be on March 20th.

Meeting adjourned at 2:46PM

Briefing Materials:

- Agenda
- Membership Rosters
- Meeting Summary, September 2023
- Executive Director's Report
- USACE presentation
- SFWMD presentation
- FCRCT Update
- RECOVER Update