Approved Meeting Summary
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force
ZOOM Meeting
May 3, 2022

1. **Welcome, Goals for the Meeting and Administrative Items**

Ms. Tanya Trujillo, Task Force (TF) Chair, called her first meeting as chair to order at 9:00 AM. She welcomed everyone and noted she was excited to learn more about the Everglades. Ms. Sandy Soto (OERI) provided some technical instructions for the ZOOM platform.

Ms. Trujillo referenced the significant funding that is now available and recognized COL James Booth, Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Jacksonville District, and Mr. Drew Bartlett, Executive Director of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), to kick-off the meeting by highlighting the incredible momentum currently ongoing in Everglades restoration.

To view the webcast in its entirety and access power point presentations and handouts, please visit: https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/tfm/

2. Momentum in Everglades Restoration

COL James Booth said he was honored to be showcasing the momentum they have achieved alongside Mr. Drew Bartlett, their partner in Everglades restoration. Because some of the members of this Task Force were relatively new, he provided an overview of the Central & Southern Florida (C&SF) project and the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration (SFER) program. Before construction of the C&SF project, much of south Florida was wetlands. The C&SF project managed by the Corps and the SFWMD provides for flood control, risk reduction, water supply, recreation, navigation, and supports the South Florida ecosystem. The watershed begins just south of Orlando and extends all the way into Florida Bay and the Florida Keys. It is an area about twice the size of New Jersey. It is the network of canals, pump stations, and water control structures that allow 9 million people to call south Florida home. It is now a highly managed system that provides flood risk reduction and water supply for 16 Floridian counties and supports south Florida's economic engine which includes agricultural, recreational, and tourism industries. It provides water to the natural system as well. South Florida is home to two national parks, one national preserve, and many national wildlife refuges that are home to 70 federally listed threatened and endangered species. This highly managed system came at a cost and the changes in timing, quantity, quality, and distribution of water, disrupted natural cycles, and affected the natural landscape and the plants and animals it supports. After decades of public advocacy, Congress authorized the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) with the goal of restoring the South Florida Ecosystem for generations to come. It is the largest ecosystem restoration project in the world.

Recent appropriations have dramatically changed the restoration outlook. The program has gathered so much momentum in the past few years that they expect to see major improvements in the South Florida Ecosystem over the next decade. Each project that is completed provides incremental ecological benefits and additional flexibility for water management. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) provided $1.1 billion for ecosystem restoration projects, the largest single investment to restore

and revitalize the Everglades. This is in addition to the FY 22 Omnibus Bill that provided $350 million for SFER construction, $8.95 million for SFER O&M, and $500,000 for the C&SF Section 216 Infrastructure Resiliency Study. The proposed FY 23 President's Budget includes $407 million for SFER construction and $10.67 million for SFER O&M. Record levels of funding have energized planning and future design, as well as construction efforts. Projects are seeing the funding necessary to complete them in accordance with the Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS). In July, the Corps and SFWMD celebrated the completion of the Kissimmee River Restoration project, which restored more than 40 square miles of the floodplain ecosystem, 20,000 acres of wetlands and 44 miles of the historic river channel. In November 2021, the completion of the Indian River Lagoon – South C-44 Reservoir was celebrated with a ribbon cutting and the pumps for the reservoir were turned on. In February, they held the groundbreaking for the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) South C-23/C-24 Stormwater Treatment Area (STA). This fall the Corps plans to host a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of the S-709 pump station, part of the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (BBCW) project. They currently have eleven active restoration construction projects with 2 additional construction contracts to be awarded this year and 5 additional construction contracts to be awarded in FY 23.

Mr. Drew Bartlett stated that Governor DeSantis signed Executive Order 19-12, prioritizing 28 projects in south Florida. The Governor pledged $2.5 billion dollars for water resources in Florida in his first year and has exceeded those expectations. Funding creates momentum, and they have certainly had the funding at the state level. At the very first SFWMD Governing Board meeting under Governor DeSantis, they approved the last contract for the Caloosahatchee Estuary Reservoir (C-43 Reservoir) that will store 140,000-acre feet of water to protect the Caloosahatchee Estuary. The pump station is almost done, berms are getting erected, and 19 control structures are being built. The C-43 Reservoir project will be online before the 2024 wet season enabling the SFWMD to protect the Caloosahatchee Estuary. The Governor wanted the project enhanced, so the state is taking it upon itself to include a water quality component associated with this reservoir so that water leaving the reservoir will be suitable for the estuary.

The state is moving out on the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP) and is supportive of the Corps finishing their Chiefs Report in 2022 for authorization in the WRDA. The SFWMD is implementing a Science Plan to make sure that as they build out the Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) clusters, they protect the aquifer and the environment. A proof of study has been done for treatment of the water before it goes down into the aquifer to make sure that it's clean. LOWRP will provide over 300,000-acre feet of storage during wet years to protect Lake Okeechobee. Of course, they partner with private landowners to put water on their land to make sure it's clean when it gets to Lake Okeechobee. The Lakeside Ranch Stormwater Treatment Area (STA), originally a CERP project, has been taken on by the state. It will help improve the quality of water entering Lake Okeechobee. The SFWMD is very focused on protecting the estuaries from those harmful lake discharges and sending the water south. The Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir project is the Governor's cornerstone project, and he challenged the SFWMD to move ahead on a wetland treatment system associated with the project. The SFWMD started that a year early and will be finishing the stormwater treatment project in 2023, so even more clean water can be sent to the Everglades.

In the 1970s and 1980s, water flowing across the central Everglades into Everglades National Park (ENP) was not clean. The state has been building 60,000 acres of wetland treatment systems to make sure the water is clean. They have made tremendous progress and the water inside ENP is clean and more than 90% of the stations in the central Everglades are clean. By

2025, the SFWMD will have all the wetland treatment systems and associated projects built out and sending clean water to the Everglades. The SFWMD already have certain wetland treatment systems meeting those goals and by the time they are done with construction this year, they will have the ability to move even more clean water into the Everglades.

The Everglades would not be completely restored without uncorking Tamiami Trail, which is that hydrologic barrier between the Central Everglades and ENP. In partnership with the park, they finished the bridges over Tamiami Trail so water can flow under those bridges. They have removed old Tamiami Trail and have moved out independently on an underground seepage wall to keep water in ENP and protect the communities east of ENP from flooding. They are almost finished with 2 ½ miles of seepage wall and are looking forward to partnering with the Corps this summer to start another 5 miles of seepage wall. The water which once stopped at Tamiami Trail twenty years ago is now continuing through Shark River Slough because of those bridges and additional infrastructure.

In the northern part of the system, they have not done the work yet and conditions are still dry. This year the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission closed the northern part of the Everglades to prevent any risk of fire. The Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) which they are partnering on with the Corps will help Big Cypress. Florida Bay is very sensitive to high salinity. Before they had the bridges and the new operating plan, they could see the fluctuations in salinity in Florida Bay. With the water operations they have done this year along with the bridges and infrastructure, they have been able to manage those fluctuations a lot better and are starting to see the environmental results. By 2025, in just three years, the following will be completed:

- East and West Reservoirs will be completed
- Clean water will be entering the Everglades
- Brand new EAA Reservoir STA
- Tamiami Trail will be raised and ready
- Completed Seepage Wall to keep water in ENP
- Restored Kissimmee River and Picayune Strand
- Completed BBCW

The increased funding and support are allowing them to see the environmental results in the ecosystem. The SFWMD has a strong partnership with the Corps and are successful because of that partnership.

3. **Task Force Member Introductions and Opening Remarks**

Task Force members were asked to introduce themselves and provide brief introductory remarks. The following Task Force Members were in attendance:

Tanya Trujillo, Task Force Chair and Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, U.S. Department of the Interior
"Alligator" Ron Bergeron Sr., Governing Board Member, SFWMD
Michael Connor, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, U.S. Department of the Army
Gene Duncan, Water Resources Director, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida
Radhika Fox, Assistant Administrator for Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Shawn Hamilton, Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Nicole LeBoeuf, Assistant Administrator for NOAA's National Ocean Service, U.S. Department

of Commerce
Patty Power for Jim Shore, General Counsel to the Seminole Tribe of Florida
Kevin Ruane, Chairman, Lee County Commission
Lisa Russell for Todd Kim, Assistant Attorney General, Environment and Natural Resources Division (ENRD), U.S. Department of Justice
Ed Smith, Director, Office of Ecosystem Projects, Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Colleen Vaughn for Carlos Monje, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, U.S. Department of Transportation
James Erskine for Eric Sutton, Special Advisor, Executive Director for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

4. **October 2020 Meeting Summary**

Ms. Trujillo noted the meeting summary from the October 2020 Task Force meeting was provided as background information and will be posted on the www.Evergladesrestoration.gov website.

5. **Director's Task Force 101/Restoration Overview**

Mr. Adam Gelber reviewed the scale and scope of the South Florida ecosystem and the role of the Task Force. The Task Force was established by WRDA 1996 which outlines the Task Force's membership, organization, purpose, and duties. The Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) supports the Task Force and its subgroups. The Task Force, its subgroups and teams are not considered advisory committees under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. OERI schedules the meetings and workshops, prepares the Congressionally mandated reports, and maintains the Evergladesrestoration.gov website. Task Force meetings and stakeholder workshops provide vital opportunities for public input. The Task Force is the only forum that provides strategic coordination and a system-wide perspective to guide the separate restoration efforts being planned and implemented in the Everglades ecosystem.

Mr. Bob Johnson (OERI) provided a video describing the hydrologic evolution of the South Florida Ecosystem. Human development altered the south Florida landscape and drainage projects in the greater Everglades began in the 1880s. By the 1980s, the adverse impacts of drainage and development in south Florida were well recognized. The hydrologic goal is to reverse the unintended impacts to the natural system attributed to the C&SF project. The impacts they are trying to address include:

- Extreme fluctuations in Lake Okeechobee water levels;
- Damaging discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries;
- Detrimental water depths and flooding durations in Everglades freshwater habitats;
- Unsuitable freshwater flows to Florida Bay, Biscayne Bay, and Lake Worth Lagoon; and
- Degraded water quality creating imbalances of native flora and fauna.

The Foundation, non-CERP projects (Kissimmee River Restoration, Herbert Hoover Dike Rehabilitation, Everglades Construction Project & Restoration Strategies, Modified Water Deliveries to ENP and C-111 South Dade) along with the CERP projects will help to reverse the adverse impacts of drainage and development.

6. Task Force Vice Chair Nomination and Election

Mr. Adam Gelber reminded everyone that Secretary Valenstein served as the Task Force Vice Chair during his tenure at FDEP. That seat is now vacant, and the Task Force can nominate and elect a non-federal member to serve as Vice Chair in accordance with the Vice Chair Protocol. This provides for continuity and helps ensure that the non-federal concerns are addressed in the administration of Task Force meetings. Mr. Ed Smith nominated Secretary Shawn Hamilton and Mr. Ron Bergeron seconded the nomination. No one was opposed. It was unanimous that Secretary Hamilton should serve as Vice Chair of the Task Force.

7. Report on Working Group (WG) and Science Coordination Group (SCG) Activities

Mr. Gelber noted that Mr. Lawrence Glenn and Ms. Angela Dunn have been serving as interim SCG Chair and Vice Chair respectively. The Task Force was asked to appoint them as Chair and Vice Chair. Mr. Ron Bergeron made a motion which was seconded by Mr. Kevin Ruane. There was no discussion and no objections. It was unanimous for Mr. Glenn and Ms. Dunn to serve as Chair and Vice Chair of the SCG.

Working Group (WG) Report – Mr. James Erskine, WG Chair, reminded the members that the mission of the WG and its subgroups is to support the Task Force in its efforts to achieve, in cooperation with all interested parties, the restoration, preservation and protection of the ecosystem while promoting a sustainable south Florida. Since the Task Force last met in October 2020, the WG met three times and covered topics such as the SFER program, invasive species, ASR Program Science Plan, and the coral disease response and restoration. The WG also hosted two Task Force Sponsored Public Engagement workshops for the Biscayne Bay and Southeastern Everglades Restoration (BBSEER) project and the IDS.

Science Coordination Group (SCG) Report – Mr. Lawrence Glenn, SCG Chair, noted the SCG was established to support the Task Force in its efforts to coordinate the scientific aspects associated with the restoration of the South Florida Ecosystem. The Science Coordination Plan tracks and coordinates programmatic level science and other research across all the agencies, identifies programmatic level priority science needs and gaps. This science informs and helps guide management decisions. The SCG is a well-integrated group of scientists that has the ability, under the SCG, to leverage all that expertise towards the many difficult questions that need to be answered. They have done some reporting on invasive exotic species and system-wide ecological indicators. The SCG has various mechanisms for coordinating science to include joint meetings with the WG, production of science and restoration reports, convening scientific workshops, participating in independent scientific meetings and conferences, developing scientific tools, and utilizing independent scientific panels and experts to review products. He highlighted some of the past activities which included understanding the significance of flow to Everglades restoration. The SCG is currently working on science integration and looking for ways to best coordinate their reporting efforts and also looking at what is happening in the southern estuary.

8. South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Program and Project Update

Ms. Mindy Parrott (SFWMD) highlighted accomplishments in 2021, noting they:

- Completed removal of the Old Tamiami Trail roadbed
- Began using the Faka Union Pump station, an important part of the Picayune Strand restoration project

- Completed the C-44 Reservoir and STA
- Began construction of:
    - 8.5 square mile area (SMA) Limited Curtain Wall
    - Restoration strategies: C-139 Flow Equalization Basin

For CERP, there are projects in various stages of planning, design, and construction. An in-depth update along with photos were provided on the IRL-S C-44 Reservoir & STA, IRL-S C-23 to C-44 Interconnect, C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir, LOWRP – ASR, CEPP EAA: A-2 Reservoir & STA, CEPP North, 8.5 SMA Limited Curtain Wall, and the BBCW Phase 1 – Cutler Wetlands. The SFWMD also manages the Restoration Strategies Program, a suite of projects created to improve water quality in America's Everglades. Some of the projects were highlighted. To date the SFWMD has met or exceeded their deadlines and is committed to getting these projects completed.

9. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Program and Project Update

Ms. Eva Velez (USACE) reviewed the construction funds. For FY22, the President's Budget included $350 million, and it was recently announced that the FY23 President's Budget would include $407 million for construction. The IIJA will include almost $1.1 billion for construction that will be used to fund three projects (IRL-South, Broward County WPA, CEPP-South Phase) and two studies (WERP and the BBSEER). Program level activities include the IDS and Restoration Coordination and Verification (RECOVER). The IDS provides the roadmap for sequencing, planning, design, and construction of federal and state projects related to Everglades restoration. It is a living document that is updated annually in a public process when new budget information is received. The IDS update process will be initiated in August 2022. RECOVER promotes an integrated view of CERP implementation to ensure the CERP goals and purposes are achieved. It is a multi-agency team of scientists, modelers, planners, and resource specialists that conducts scientific and technical evaluations and assessments. It communicates those results to managers, decision makers and the public. Ms. Velez reviewed the four planning studies (BBSEER, IRL – South, LOWRP and WERP) currently underway and provided an in-depth review of those projects in design and construction, and operations.

Ms. Nicole Leboeuf thanked Ms. Velez for the BBSEER project update which is very important to them. NOAA is here to support this effort. She also announced that NOAA released an interagency report in February 2022 on projected sea level rise along our coasts and NOAA would welcome the opportunity to bring subject matter experts to everyone around this table. Report is available at: Sea Level Rise Technical Report: Download and FAQs (noaa.gov)

Public Comment

Ms. Irela Bague (Chief Bay Officer Miami Dade County) said she was thankful for the collaboration and thanked the Task Force for hosting workshops on Biscayne Bay and the IDS. She thanked everyone for the amazing progress being made.

10. **Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM)**

Mr. Tim Gysan reminded everyone that the C&SF project balances multiple Congressionally authorized purposes: flood control, navigation, water supply, enhancement of fish and wildlife and recreation. Lake Okeechobee is the heart of the C&SF system and was incorporated into the C&SF project back in the 1940s when it was first authorized. The C&SF system has seven different operating manuals that provide guidance to water managers on how to operate the

system. Volume 3 (Lake Okeechobee and EAA) is being updated under the LOSOM process. When the current operating plan, Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS), was developed in 2008, it was determined that it should be revisited when the Herbert Hoover Dike rehabilitation or the C-43 & C-44 were complete. They are nearing completion of all three and the Corps is re-examining Lake Okeechobee operations to consider the additional infrastructure that will be completed in 2022.

The LOSOM process was kicked off in 2019 and will be finished in early 2023. Study objectives include: managing risk to public health and safety, life and property; continuing to meet the authorized purposes for navigation, recreation, and flood control; improve water supply performance; and enhance ecology in Lake Okeechobee, northern estuaries and across the South Florida Ecosystem. In south Florida stakeholder perspectives was an important piece of the LOSOM process. They held 10 public meetings and received over 8,000 comments. They also held 6 educational webinars. LOSOM will be an improvement over LORS because it is benefits focused, looks at the system with a holistic perspective and utilizes real time knowledge of climate conditions, weather data, climate projections, and system needs to make educated decisions about how releases are made. A big consideration within LOSOM is how they work with the State of Florida in determining water supply deliveries. The state is responsible for making those water supply allocations and the intent is to work closely with the state. They are currently developing the draft Environmental Impact Statement and the draft Operating Manual. Final Record of Decision is expected in early 2023.

Ms. Nicole LeBoeuf offered NOAA's expertise related to climate change, sea level rise, marsh migration, seagrass movement, and harmful algal blooms to this process.

11. WRDA 2020 – Invasive Species Risk Assessment Prioritization and Management

Mr. Adam Gelber (OERI) provided an overview of the Task Force's Invasive Exotic Species Strategic Action Framework (SAF) which was initially completed in 2015 under the leadership of Assistant Secretary Estenoz who was the Director of OERI. The SAF was updated in 2020 and is organized along the four phases of the invasion curve. It is intended to help them improve invasive species coordination and help decision makers understand the connections between the goals and strategies as well as identify priorities. The SAF includes a set of complementary resources: 2020 Progress Report, 2020 Priorities; 2020 Case Studies, and FY19 Snapshot budget. Section 504 of WRDA 2020 directs the Task Force to develop a priority list of invasive species that significantly impact the structure and function of ecological communities, native species, or habitats within the South Florida Ecosystem. The Task Force member agencies are directed to manage those species through coordination and collaboration to develop innovative strategies and tools, guide applied research, facilitate improved management, and to prevent future introductions of nonnative species. Mr. Gelber proposed that the Task Force direct the WG, SCG and OERI to implement WRDA 2020 direction to develop a priority list of species, using the described requirements.

Mr. James Erskine added that Florida is susceptible to invasive species and more than 500 non-native fish and wildlife species have been reported in Florida. At least 139 of those species are established and reproducing in the wild and many of the most notorious invaders like Burmese pythons and Argentine black and white tegus have taken up residence in the South Florida Ecosystem. This legislation provides the opportunity to build upon the extensive list of conditional prohibited non-native fish and wildlife that the state regulates. He encouraged the Task Force to meet the challenge of invasive species head on. Mr. Ron Bergeron agreed this

issue is extremely important and they are continually removing invasive plants and animals out of the Everglades so that the native wildlife can survive.

Ms. Trujillo agreed it was important for them to meet the requirements of WRDA 2020.

Public Comment

None

Assignments, Next Steps and Closing Comments

Ms. Trujillo reminded everyone that the next TF meeting is scheduled for October 19, 2022, in Wash., DC. She said she was honored to chair this Task Force and looked forward to working with Secretary Hamilton and learning about the south Florida environment.

Meeting adjourned.

Handouts:

1. Agenda
2. Momentum in Everglades Restoration
    a. USACE
    b. SFWMD
3. Task Force Member Membership
4. October 2020 Meeting Summary
5. Director's Report
    a. Task Force Overview
    b. Restoration Overview – Introductory Video
    c. Restoration Overview – Presentation
6. Task Force Vice Chair Protocol
7. WG and SCG Activities Update
8. SFWMD Program and Project Update
9. USACE Program and Project Update
10. Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual Update
11. WRDA 2020 – Invasive Species Risk Assessment Prioritization and Management
    a. Priorities and Path Forward presentation
    b. WRDA 2020 Legislation