

**Draft Meeting Summary**  
**South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force**  
**Naples, Florida**  
**June 1, 2023**

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

Ms. Tanya Trujillo, Task Force Chair and Assistant Secretary for Water and Science called the meeting to order at 9:45 am. She noted that the Everglades requires continual protection and conservation to address the large-scale alteration of this ecologically significant landscape. She congratulated everyone for the tremendous progress they have made to restore this storied ecosystem. The Everglades has set the bar for what is possible when people come together to act at a large scale on behalf of nature, resilience, and the long-term well-being of communities.

She participated in the ribbon cutting for the Taylor Slough Flow Improvement Project the prior day. That project will allow clean freshwater to flow south through Taylor Slough and into Florida Bay, where it is needed to balance salinity levels and promote ecological health. Current restoration projects, such as the National Park System's Critical Ecosystem Studies Initiative have the potential to halt and even reverse some of the most recent environmental degradation of the Everglades to create and maintain the Everglades for generations to come. In the past two years, the Biden-Harris administration has allocated a record \$2 billion for Everglades restoration through the Investing in America agenda and historic presidential budget requests. Everglades restoration is a model of collaborative conservation consistent with President Biden's America the Beautiful initiative, a challenge to pursue a locally led and voluntary, nationwide effort to conserve, connect and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife upon which they all depend. They would not be where they are now with ecosystem restoration without partnerships with the State of Florida, the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes, local governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders who have been stalwart supporters of this effort through the decades. This Task Force continues to play a pivotal role in bringing together all the parties invested in the ongoing health of the South Florida Ecosystem as it faces the dire challenges presented by climate change.

Mr. Shawn Hamilton, Task Force Vice Chair and Secretary of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection welcomed everyone and noted that the State of Florida has some great leadership waiting in the wings to come in. Councilwoman Holly Smith, former Senator and current Commissioner Rene Garcia and Roger Young have been recommended to serve on this Task Force by Governor DeSantis and are pending appointments by the Secretary of Interior. They are looking forward to serving and they will do a great job. He thanked the Chair and all the federal agencies on the partnership with the state agencies for the continued collaboration. They have been challenged to find ways to find solutions and opportunities to do more in any given day.

Mr. Kevin Cunniff noted he was taking over the role formally held by Mr. Gene Duncan who unfortunately passed away in November of 2022 after a long battle with cancer. Gene was a military officer in the United States Army and specialized in human intelligence. He served the

Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida for over 30 years, and he did so with extreme passion, dedication, and tenacity. He embodied what it means to serve. His legacy and perhaps his greatest impact for the Miccosukee Tribe was leading the establishment of the 10 parts per billion (ppb) water quality standards for Phosphorus under the Clean Water Act on the Alligator Alley Reservation. He worked very tirelessly along with his team to achieve this. The 10 ppb was taken after years of scientific monitoring and assessment within the reservation boundary and supported by all science that is being conducted by the many agencies involved in Everglades restoration. It is important to note that this is not an arbitrary number and is based on what the science is telling them. The Tribe appreciates how hard Gene worked to serve their interests and it is his hope that he will continue with that same dedication to service.

Mr. James Erskine shared that Gene was his mentor and hired him straight out of college. He worked alongside him for 15 years teaching him how to behave in meetings such as this, how to get to extremely remote areas in the Everglades and the importance of putting science in the decision-making process. In addition to that, he was a friend and was there for the birth of all 3 of his children. All three of his children experienced the Everglades for the first time with Gene.

Mr. Ron Bergeron said that Gene was a role model for all of them. He always returned phone calls and had an in-depth knowledge of the environment and understood the mission of saving one of the natural wonders of the world. He asked for a moment of silence for Gene.

Ms. Trujillo noted they share their appreciation and gratitude for his service and noted the importance of a mentor to the next generation.

Mr. Adam Gelber provided some housekeeping items and reminded everyone the meeting was being recorded and webcast. He noted there would be 2 public comment periods for those attending in person and participating via ZOOM.

## **2. 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*

*Shawn Hamilton, Task Force Vice Chair and Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection*

*Ron Bergeron Sr., Governing Board Member, South Florida Water Management District*

*Adam Blalock, Deputy Secretary, Ecosystem Restorations, Florida Department of Environmental Protection*

*Michael Connor, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, U.S. Department of the Army*

*Kevin Cunniff, Chief Sustainability Officer, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida*

*Jeananne Gettle for Radhika Fox, Assistant Administrator for Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*

*David Hawk for Carlos Monje, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, U.S. Department of Transportation*

*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*

*Lisa Russell for Todd Kim, Assistant Attorney General, Environment and Natural Resources Division (ENRD), U.S. Department of Justice*

*Roger Young, Special Advisor, Executive Director for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

*Adam Gelber, Executive Director, Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives*

*James Erskine, WG Chair, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

*Lawrence Glenn, SCG Chair, South Florida Water Management District*

## **Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) Update**

Mr. Adam Gelber noted the importance of going on field trips to see the resource firsthand. The interactions that take place during these field trips are immeasurable and they hope to continue facilitating these in the future. It was undeniable to see the invasive exotic species on the landscape everywhere they turned, whether it was Brazilian Pepper, Melaleuca or a Preacher Lizard running across the parking lot. Invasive species loves the Everglades and Florida and have lots of spaces to hide. WRDA 2020 provided direction to the Task Force and OERI has been working diligently on addressing and implementing Section 504 of WRDA 2020. A team of subject matter experts have been convened from all the Task Force member agencies to work on this issue.

Ms. Carrie Beeler reviewed the WRDA 2020 direction to develop a priority list of invasive species and focus on cooperative and collaborative efforts to guide applied research, develop innovative strategies and tools, and implement specific management, control, and eradication activities, including prevention.

This Task Force has been involved in trying to deal with the invasive species issue for a very long time and developed an Invasive Species Strategic Action Framework in 2015 which was updated in 2020. The Framework was organized along the four phases (prevention, eradication, containment, and resource protection & long-term management) of the invasion curve. The team of experts has focused its efforts on prevention. An in-depth review of the process used to develop the priority list of 19 invasive species split between 5 taxa (freshwater invertebrates, freshwater vertebrates, marine, plants, terrestrial vertebrates) was provided. Recommended actions include interrupting pathways to prevent these species from getting here through regulations, outreach, and education. The team will be developing, calibrating, and validating methods for prioritization for Early Detection and Rapid Response. For established species, the team will evaluate current lists and prioritize using newly developed processes. The priority species list will be updated every few years.

### **3. USACE Program and Project Update**

Ms. Eva Velez noted that for FY23 they received incredible funding from the Congress, both in their annual appropriations as well as in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). The FY23 Omnibus Bill includes \$453.84 million for construction and \$10.67 million for O&M. The BIL includes an additional \$1.097 billion for construction. The FY24 J Sheet, total estimated SFER programmed construction cost is \$23,617,006,000. They are making a lot of progress and their work is benefitting the Northern Estuaries, Lake Okeechobee, the Greater Everglades, the

Southern Coastal Systems and then most recently the very welcome addition of the Southwest module. For FY24, there is \$415 million for construction and \$12.9 million for O&M. The annual update of the Integrated Delivery Schedule will begin in the summer under the leadership of Dr. Tabitha Elkington from the Corps and Ms. Mindy Parrott at the SFWMD. A series of listening sessions are planned. Draft IDS will be released in September 2023 and the final will be released at the fall Task Force meeting. An in-depth update was provided on those projects in planning, design and construction and operations.

The Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) will improve water quality, reconnect the compartmentalized system, and restore connectivity. WERP continues to move forward, and they continue working with the communities. The Wingate Mill STA feature has been removed from the TSP and replaced by a natural flowway. Alternative Hybrid Natural Flow (HNF) is the new alternative under review by the Project Delivery Team. It will restore the rain-driven system with existing water/operational flexibility.

Mr. Drew Bartlett noted there was a lot of discussion on this project at the last TF meeting. At the SFWMD's GB meeting there was a lot of engagement from landowners, the public, those they care about conservation, and they were not pleased with the STA footprint. He is pleased to see that it is gone, and they are bringing nature back to that landscape rather than drainage. Staff at the SFWMD are engaging all the landowners in that area, particularly upstream, talking about, an activity as well, all, all those things to try to get better communication and better coordination as this goes forward. He said he appreciated the Corps taking up that suggestion. Good to see the North Feeder STA included since they can't accomplish WERP without it. The SFWMD is providing that land, former citrus area, for that STA as well as the science to make sure it works. On the southern features, which is not a subject of controversy, the SFWMD is moving out and designing those culverts and planning construction contracts. The SFWMD stands ready to make sure they achieve that WRDA 2024 schedule. Secretary Hamilton said the state stands ready to support WERP. Studies and planning are important, but they do not advocate for any unnecessary delays to accomplish any aspect of this project.

Ms. Patty Power noted the actions by the federal and state governments over the many decades that have caused damage to the greater Everglades and the environment is perceived by the Seminole Tribe as harm to the Tribal members individually as well as the Tribe as well. The Tribe has consistently requested what is now WERP for nearly 30 years. The Tribe recognizes that there has been a lot of progress, but they need to keep going. This project truly reflects what the Tribe needs. Every day they don't get this project under construction, more harm is being caused to the area. They are out of time and cannot afford any future delays. The Seminole Tribe urged they finish the Chief's Report, and they look forward to the groundbreaking.

COL Jaime Booth said they appreciate being able to come out the prior day and appreciate the consultation with both the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes. The Central and Southern Florida system has had impacts on the environment but directly on the Reservations and they are committed to moving forward with this study and addressing those issues. They must discuss those hard issues and make sure that they are having open discussions with everyone. Summer 2016 when WERP was initiated and here they are in 2023 and they are still working on the study

and trying to get to yes. It is important to take everyone's perspective, needs, and concerns into account as they move this forward.

Mr. Kevin Cunniff, noted the Miccosukee Tribe is very pleased to see they are taking a different approach on how to address some of the water quality issues through nature-based solutions and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK). The land is resilient, and the land can heal when given the opportunity to do so. Removing the STA is critically important and will allow for the habitats and resources that are on land now to serve its purpose. The Tribe urges the SFWMD to work with the landowners within northern parts of the Wingate Mill portion of this watershed to implement best management practices. With respect to the North Feeder STA, another critically important component of the water quality puzzle, the Tribe urges the Corps and the SFWMD to continue working together on the cost share issues that may be outstanding to ensure this project can be designed, implemented, paid for, and maintained. Everglades restoration is about decompartmentalization and removing the boundaries allowing the water to flow. The Silver Jackets program sponsored by the Corps with FDOT taking the lead brings together stakeholders to address Tamiami Trail resiliency while considering the needs for traffic safety, wildlife safety, and the safety of people. The Tribe is very engaged and is promoting the needs and interests of Tribal Members living along Tamiami Trail while also promoting raising Tamiami Trail can bring additional ecological and hydrologic benefits while intersecting with Everglades restoration projects, such as WERP and Picayune Strand. The Tribe notes that Tamiami Trail constitutes single greatest impact the Miccosukee Tribe has seen affect its Tribal Community since the Seminole Wars.

## **Public Comment**

### *In person commenters*

Mr. Ron Bergeron (Bergeron Everglades Foundation and landowner) reminded everyone that although WERP has several stakeholders, the environment is the number one stakeholder. It is a rain driven system and they need to make sure the water levels are compatible with the environment, wildlife, and plant communities. It is important to communicate with all the stakeholders. The first alternative would have destroyed 500-year-old cypress trees and he thanked the COL and the Corps for realizing they can't destroy a natural habitat anywhere in the Everglades. He encouraged everyone to continue working together and the American dream will still be alive.

Mr. Greg Olsen (Olsen Ranch and Williams Ranch) said he was born in Florida and has spent his entire life in Florida. His wife comes from a ranching family and her paternal grandparents were cattle ranchers back in the 1900s. In 1950, his wife's family bought 13-square miles and several family members own land in the WERP footprint. He has been friends with Mr. Bergeron for 33 years and they both share the love for this land. He along with other property owners just recently found out about WERP and find it insulting. Hearing that WERP was a done deal was not received well. This property is beautiful, and he sees panthers and bears all the time. He has been out there for 40-years, and it is dry in the dry season and wet in the wet season. He is

concerned with what WERP will do to his property. He does not want to be the sacrificial lamb and receive polluted water on his property.

Mr. Brad Cornell (Audubon Florida) is supportive of the current WERP alternative moving forward and being included in WRDA 2024. Audubon was a contractor for the Corps from 2005 to 2011 collecting baseline ecological indicator data. That monitoring was halted, and Audubon strongly recommends re-starting that monitoring to ensure restoration objectives are accomplished. Monitoring is also vital for effective adaptive management. They see this project as vital for hydrologic fixes for many parts of the western Everglades and long overdue.

Mr. Justin Dixon (landowner) said he is 26-years old, and his grandkids will probably not see what he has seen in the Everglades. The Everglades is the one last place where one can shut off all the distractions in the world. The EAA project, once completed, will allow them to send water in times of drought. He asked that they please leave the Everglades alone and not destroy what they are trying to protect.

Jeff Dixon said that WERP is really two separate parts, East and West. East is altered lands, cow pastures, farms, and housing developments. West is old grove forests. WERP has been in design for seven years, yet no one told the property owners for six of those years. The team that once told them that a 4,000-acre STA was required is now telling them that it is not required. This project makes the entire Reservation drier except for very western tip. He asked that they listen to those who have grown up in the Everglades.

Mr. Robert Markham (Markham Family property) noted his family has been down here for over a hundred years. He thanked the Corps for the progress that has been made. They are moving in the right direction. Ultimately this should be about saving the Everglades and not about meeting a political or financial deadline. He urged them to think about long term ramifications to the environment by changing those areas that work. Adding too much contaminated water will kill wildlife in the ecosystem.

Anthony Gonzales (landowner) said as a landowner, he goes out there all the time and believes in everything Mr. Bergeron said.

Ms. Michele Arquette Palermo (Conservancy of SW Florida) regarding the US 41 Resiliency Study, Silver Jackets, which was brought forward because of the 7 bridges along US 41. That study came up with six alternatives for resiliency. As someone mentioned during the ribbon cutting ceremony, they have a responsibility to taxpayers who are investing billions of dollars in restoration. She urged this Task Force, and the agencies present at the meeting will join them in voicing opposition to building a wall along South Florida. She also encouraged the vacant FDOT seat on the WG be filled.

Ms. Marissa Carrozzo (National Parks Conservation Association) highlighted the importance of WERP. It has incredible significance for Big Cypress National Preserve, America's first national preserve. This project has overcome many obstacles over the years, and they are encouraged by Task Force member comments. Letter signed by 17 environmental organizations

in support of WERP was provided to the members. Thanked the Corps and the SFWMD for working to address the stakeholder concerns.

Wayne Vickers (resident) said he was relatively new to the area and noted there is a dry ridge that runs through there that has been habitat for the Osceola Turkey, panthers and other animal and plants. They are all for conservation and being good stewards of the land. He asked that they not charge forward and suggested they get together and collectively come up with a solution.

Ms. Kelly Cox (Audubon Florida) reiterated the lack of communication mentioned by several of the previous commenters. WERP will provide enormous ecological benefits for the over 600,000 acres in the Big Cypress watershed. It was great that the stakeholder concerns were heard regarding the Wingate Mill STA. They are supportive of the North Feeder STA which is essential to achieving the goals of the project.

Mr. Joseph Sherrod (Sherrod's Ranch) noted he is a landowner in this region and his family has ranched here for over 100 years. He reiterated the lack of communication regarding WERP and noted he received one phone call from the SFWMD. He asked the Task Force not act in haste with this plan and direct the agencies to improve engagement with the stakeholders.

Mr. Michael Elfenbein (Cypress Chapter Izaak Walton) would like to see the science driven standard of 10 ppb Phosphorus established for the Miccosukee Reservation applied to any water being diverted from the triangle to the preserve. He appreciated the comments regarding the plume in the triangle since he physically worked to remove some of that vegetation from the triangle area several months ago. He expressed his concern that although time was spent with the Tribes there was no concerted effort to spend that time with the stakeholders, Gladesmen, and folks that have spoken at this meeting. The Gladesmen culture is federally recognized, and he would expect the Corps to value that culture like other cultures. He sympathizes with the Miccosukee Tribe, but he simply does not want to see their problem become somebody else's problem. As they go about developing innovative strategies, he encouraged them to engage with sportsmen that know the landscape and have the tools and desire to help eradicate the invasive species. They must also consider the restrictions placed on access to places that invasives are reproducing, such as wilderness designations on federal lands.

Mr. Matt DePaolis (Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation) said compartmentalization has been happening for the last 100 – 200 years and the reason they are there today. These ecosystems have been split up and put into their separate buckets and the people have been split up and pitted against each other when in fact they all need to come together and accept that these projects and surrounding areas need to be looked at holistically if they are going to be solving these issues. It requires partners working together towards the common goal of restoring these environments in such a way that won't leave anyone feeling slighted at the end of it. It is also about respecting the historical traditions and property traditions that exist in these areas. It is important to get this done right and they listen to what people are saying.

Mr. Andy Wells-Bean (Audubon Western Everglades) Audubon Western Everglades, the oldest grassroots conservation organization in Southwest Florida and their members and supporters care

deeply about the ecological integrity of the western Everglades. It is their view that WERP is vital and long overdue. They strongly support the Corps working with the partners to ensure that it can be included in WRDA 2024. The DOI is already spending tens of billions of dollars to mitigate wildfires due to over drainage and impact in hydrology and this will help mitigate that. They in Southwest Florida are feeling the effects of climate change and appreciate the potential for these projects to benefit this region's climate resiliency.

Mr. Thomas Oates (self) said that the current WERP proposal doesn't focus on what's best for the environment. Instead, its objective is to provide drainage for a single entity to the detriment of the preserve. The private property owners are stewards of the land and are there for the benefit of the panther and the multitude of other animals that call the Western Everglades home. The current proposal will adversely impact all the private property owners and will only benefit a single interest. The SFWMD's modeling fails to acknowledge that a significant amount of untreated water will end up in the preserve and adjacent areas by virtue of what remains in the canals. It is a good thing to remove the main line pumping nutrient rich water from the reservation, but to relocate it to the preserve is not. It is arguably never going to be 10 ppb and this will adversely affect the reserve.

#### *Public Commenters via ZOOM*

Mr. Newton Cook (United Water Fowlers) noted they have covered everything from the Kissimmee down to ENP but not a single word has been said about the ecology of Lake Okeechobee, the heart of the Everglades. They did not hear about it because they all know that the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) is bad for the lake ecology. They heard about the St. Lucie Estuary and they heard about the Caloosahatchee Estuary but not a word about Lake Okeechobee. LOSOM keeps the lake too high for too long and too often. The ecology of Lake Okeechobee is being ignored and they are going to pay a dear price when that lake becomes muck with no vegetation.

Mr. Dick Rosher (self) said he is 83 years old and has been out in the Everglades his entire life. Seeing what is going on with all of this is very disturbing. They are talking about raising water levels and they already have an issue with water on Highway 41 by the Miami-Dade/Collier County line. The highways get flooded and become unusable. It seems extreme and will be disastrous in the long run.

Mr. Ray Rosher (self) said he has spent his entire life out in their camp in the Everglades. They own property on the edge of Big Cypress near the end of the L-28. He agrees with Mr. Bergeron's comment about the ecology being the biggest concern. In this area there are a lot of oak trees and pines and just a few inches of water can dramatically impact the wildlife, flora, and fauna. He is not in favor of raising water levels and believes they will be fixing one problem and hurting the environment in the end. The ecology must be the winner.

Mr. Joe Frank (landowner) as a landowner and full-time resident of the Western Everglades area, he opposed to the alternative hybrid natural flow plan and believes the presentation slides could be posters for environmental and social injustice. The solution should incorporate historical natural flow ways and volumes to heal the Everglades. These altered flows will cause further



harm to the existing ecosystems. The plugs which sound like a dam to him could create an unauthorized STA at Seminole and Miccosukee lands and other areas north of Alligator Alley and west of the L-28. This could also create potential health risk for the residents of Tribal lands in the affected area. Water quality should be a top priority. If the water is cleaned upstream, then these proposed dams would not be needed. It is his hope that the agencies and stakeholders can work together to come up with a plan that would be healthy for the Everglades, the Big Cypress area, and all humans in the ecosystems of South Florida.

Mr. Matt Taylor (landowner) noted they have come a long way and thanked all the parties involved. He along with other landowners within the Big Cypress National Preserve are concerned about two slides not shown at this meeting that demonstrated the hydroperiod differences in a wet year and an average year after WERP is implemented. It shows that the water levels will not only be elevated but reside on the landscape for periods of time that are simply not compatible with the landscape. There will be no distinction between wet and dry periods within the western Everglades. WERP stalled twice due to the science not panning out. This change in the hydroperiods that are being proposed for the western Everglades will not pan out either. There's been a lot of discussion about potential flowage easements on private property and he is vehemently opposed to that. He will not permit a flowage easement on his property nor will the people he represents. The ecosystem in and around the Big Cypress and the rest of the Everglades is what's most important. He urged them to get the science right and not ignore the data.

#### **4. SFWMD Update**

Ms. Mindy Parrott noted the big commitment to the Everglades and other water resources in Florida when Governor DeSantis signed Executive Order 23-06. It dedicated \$3.5 billion for Everglades restoration and water resources over the next four years. It will expedite projects that minimize the risk of harmful discharges and send water south. It will also ensure meaningful progress on storage for the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), Lake Okeechobee Watershed, and the Indian River Lagoon – South (IRL-S). In the first year, over \$600 million was appropriated for the Everglades. The SFWMD will accelerate construction of the A-2 Reservoir pump station in the EAA and the C-23/24 South reservoir in the IRL-S. Additionally, the SFWMD is preparing a Feasibility Study, Lake Okeechobee Component A Reservoir (LOCAR), under Section 203 to expedite northern storage. LOCAR will evaluate a 200,000 ac-ft above ground storage reservoir. The purpose is to retain water during wet periods for later use during dry periods for the benefit of Lake Okeechobee. They are working closely with the Corps on this study and hope to have the final feasibility study in December of 2023. The SFWMD remains committed to the science supporting Aquifer Storage and Recovery well and continue to work on their science plan. They recently entered into an agreement with the research group from the Corps to address the remaining uncertainties surrounding those wells that are needed.

In addition to the projects the SFWMD has with the federal government and the Corps, they are implementing other water resource projects with local governments, counties, drainage districts, and private landowners to implement water resource projects for the benefit of the south Florida ecosystem and the people that live, work, and play here. The economy is based on clean water

and a thriving environment. An in-depth review was provided on the SFWMD's STAs which are treating over 57,000 acre-ft of water as well as projects to restore the Caloosahatchee River, Indian River Lagoon, St. Lucie River, Loxahatchee River Watershed, and restoring water flow to Biscayne Bay.

### **Approval of Meeting Summary**

Secretary Hamilton made a motion to approve the October 2022 meeting summary which was seconded by Mr. Adam Blalock. There was no discussion, and the summary was approved without objection.

### **5. Restoration, Coordination, Verification (RECOVER) Update**

Ms. Gina Ralph reminded everyone that the purpose of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) Monitoring and Assessment Plan (MAP) is to measure the system-wide responses to CERP. MAP is their single vision for all the components that need to be monitored, the frequency with which they need to be monitored, and the spatial distribution of where that monitoring occurs. MAP objectives include establishing a pre-CERP reference state, providing an assessment of system-wide responses, detecting unexpected responses resulting from CERP activities, and supporting scientific investigations designed to increase ecosystem understanding, establish cause and effect relationships, and interpret unanticipated results. The RECOVER team was put in place as part of the Programmatic Regulations to monitor CERP success. An in-depth review was provided on how the information they have been collecting since 2004 or 2009, depending on the indicator, is summarized so that everyone understands the status and trends and how it is used in reports, such as the 2024 System Status Report.

A monitoring inventory workshop is planned for July 19-20<sup>th</sup> to better understand what is being monitored by different agencies in different parts of the system and how that can be leveraged. They are going to go region by region and figure out if there are gaps or overlaps in their monitoring. The second periodic update will be a modeling exercise that looks at what they predicted would occur in the Yellow Book and whether they are getting those benefits they thought they were going to get given that some of the components don't look the same as they did in the Yellow Book. The MAP evaluation will help them understand statistically if they have the power from the data that they are collecting to say that they are seeing an increase in a certain indicator due to CERP. If they find that something has changed, then they need to change their science program to capture that change. Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress (CISRERP), in their 2022 report, suggested the Science Coordination Group develop a Science Plan for south Florida to guide resource investment across multiple agencies, fill critical knowledge gaps for restoration decision-making, identify feasible prioritized science actions. The list of high priority science actions included model development, targeted data collection, data analysis and research and synthesis. RECOVER's efforts to update the MAP can be leveraged by the Science Plan and proposes to work in parallel with the SCG if a Science Plan is developed for CERP and non-CERP projects.

### **6. National Research Council Update**

Ms. Stephanie Johnson noted that the mandate for the CISRERP comes from WRDA 2000. The Committee is charged with producing a report that:

1. Assesses progress in restoring the natural system.
2. Discusses significant accomplishments of the restoration.
3. Discusses and evaluates scientific and engineering issues that may impact natural system restoration progress; and
4. Reviews monitoring and assessment protocols for evaluation of CERP progress.

This is the 9<sup>th</sup> report and is a consensus report of the 12 committee members. Congress wants to know if they are getting the benefits from their investments and are the primary audience. An in-depth review of the key findings in the report was provided. The Committee recommends that to support and sustain WQBEL attainment, the SFWMD should implement a rigorous adaptive management framework that includes:

- Establishment of near-term milestones for each flow-way.
- Establishment of an independent science advisory committee (like ASR)
- Consideration of phosphorus inflow concentrations and loading as key drivers affecting WQBEL attainment; and
- Additional monitoring, research, analysis, and modeling to help optimize and sustain STA performance.

The committee took a deep dive into the topic of climate change, the last time it looked at this topic was in 2014. In this review they focused on the positive improvement of real engagement in using sea level rise information in USACE planning. They expressed concern about the lack of use of precipitation/temperature information in quantitative analysis and the risk of advancing a project that is not viable under climate change. The committee recommends the USACE develop guidance for quantitative analysis of inland lows and the USACE and the SFWMD develop scenarios of future precipitation and temperature and a strategy to use them. Science is more important as CERP pivots from planning to operations/management and revised strategies for monitoring, modeling, and synthesis can strengthen the science support for future decisions. The science enterprise is complex, it's not just limited to CERP, it's non-CERP and RECOVER has its hands full, the SCG is best positioned to develop a multiagency Everglades Science Plan.

## **7. Report on WG and SCG Activities**

Mr. James Erskine reported on the WG activities since the Task Force last met in October 2022. Three joint meetings were held with the SCG, and the next meeting is scheduled for September along with an IDS workshop. The WG and SCG held a series of planning sessions to develop and refine its goals and objectives for the year. The Florida Coral Reef Coordination Team serves as the principal advisory body to the WG/SCG for issues impacting Florida's coral reef and associated resources. Team has held two meetings and is developing a database of relevant programs.

Mr. Lawrence Glenn noted they have heard it twice at this meeting it is a good idea to have a Science Plan. Science is important for the decision-making process and how they implement and

operate projects. The magnitude of the science needs is beyond any one organization and requires all the entities working on science in south Florida. The need for a Science Plan is real. The SCG developed a Science Plan in 2010 and they can go back and determine what has been learned since 2010 and what uncertainties remain. One of the benefits of having this Science Plan is that it will have a prioritized list of those things they need to tackle to ensure that Everglades restoration is going to be successful. Another benefit is that all the agencies and organizations can pick it up and use it to guide their investments and staff to ensure the science is there when they need it.

Mr. Cunniff reminded everyone that the White House memo directs them to consider ITEK in federal decision-making processes. He encourages the incorporation of the knowledge base from the folks who live, die, and have sustained the culture over the many years into the Science Plan.

### **Public Comment**

#### *In person commenters*

Ms. Michelle Arquette Palermo (Conservancy of SW Florida) echoed the WERP comments that WERP be put forward for consideration in WRDA 2024. She noted the importance of the Picayune Strand and the countless efforts that went into this project long before it was a CERP project. They can now see a light at the end of the tunnel, but they still don't have a water quality feature identified. Water quality must be a priority for Picayune Strand.

Mr. Shawn Clem (Audubon Florida) said she has been working in the Everglades for over 20 years. She reinforced the importance of ecological monitoring. She is encouraged by the development of the SW Florida module which is overdue. The SW Florida ecosystem is understudied and under protected and it is critically linked to the greater Everglades.

Ms. Kellie Ralston (Bonefish and Tarpon Trust) while her organization is all about the fish, they recognize the importance of habitat and water quality. From Lake Okeechobee down to the corals, it is all connected. She thanked the Governor, Legislature, Congressional champions as well as the Administration for the cooperation, coordination, and funding to make sure they maintain Everglades restoration momentum. They are very supportive of WERP moving forward. They also support LOWRP and LOCAR. All the construction means nothing if they don't achieve the goal on the back end and RECOVER and science are key. It is critical to update the Science Plan and she believes it could be used to seek out additional data sources.

Mr. Mike Elfenbein - (Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League) said it seems they have cast aside saving the landscape for species in the name of a restoration project. For example, land which was intended to be a wildlife corridor to allow panthers to cross the Caloosahatchee River is now being considered for an STA. He was recently with FWC staff and was told that the reason there's no food sources for the panther is due to hydrologic issues. They are proposing to put an additional 6 to 12 inches of water on the landscape. He also noted that wilderness designations will work in contrast to all the millions of dollars and countless hours of efforts they spend to restore these places. While they can't change the wilderness designations that have already been established, they have an opportunity right now to do something about the proposed

wilderness designations for Big Cypress National Preserve. FWC has expressed strong concern that wilderness designations would unnecessarily hinder natural resource management, including control of invasive exotic species and the maintenance of native fish and wildlife habitats. They also expressed that wilderness designations would result in restrictions on public access. He asked the Chair to address these issues.

#### *Commenters via ZOOM*

Ms. Rhonda Rolff (self) asked whether the Task Force or Working Group were going to take a deep dive into the implications of the Supreme Court decision the prior week. It will mean a lot to the ecological restoration partners, many of whom are at the FWC meeting in Fort Myers. She asked that FWC and FWRI be featured more prominently in some of the restoration work. The NRC report focuses a lot on restoration success, like biological indicators and FWC has some amazing people doing some amazing work. She suggested FWC meetings adopt a format like this so that people would be able to participate and share their thoughts. She asked that they keep the focus on water quality. She has been advocating for healthier water quality to regrow eel grasses and seagrasses for the manatees and the fish habitat. She also hates to see them requiring so much glyphosate or so many herbicides spraying in general and asked that they get rid of the nutrients.

Ms. Nyla Pipes (One Florida Foundation) said it is exciting for her, living along the North Fork of the St. Lucie River to see the progress that's going on with IRL South. It is incredibly important to get those STAs and reservoirs completed. ASR is an important component of CERP, and she is glad to hear that the science is moving forward. They are very optimistic about LOCAR. The need for northern storage has been one of the major things that she has worked on over the last decade and she is excited to see it finally moving forward. With regards to WERP, they must make sure it works for everyone, including the landowners and Gladesmen. Finally, as they move forward with the rest of CERP, important to keep in mind water supply for the people, not just the environment.

Ms. Martha Guyas provided written public comments.

#### **Next Steps and Closing Remarks**

Mr. Adam Blalock noted all the work they still need to do and that they need to do that as expeditiously as possible and let the science guide their decisions as they work together to overcome obstacles.

Mr. Adam Gelber reminded everyone the next Task Force meeting will be held in Washington, DC.

Ms. Tanya Trujillo thanked staff for putting the meeting together and the members for their public service.

Meeting adjourned at 4:20 PM.

Handouts:

1. Agenda
2. Meeting Summary, October 19, 2022
3. Implementing Sec 504, WRDA 2020 presentation
4. USACE Program and Project Update
5. SFWMD Program and Project Update
6. RECOVER Update
7. National Research Council
  - a. Presentation
  - b. 2022 CISRERP full report
  - c. 2022 CISRERP highlights
8. WG and SCG Update

DRAFT