

Approved Meeting Summary
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force
Stewart Lee Udall Department of the Interior Building
Yates Auditorium
1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240
October 19, 2022

1. Welcome and Introductions

Ms. Tanya Trujillo called the meeting to order at 9:30 AM and thanked those that were able to travel from Florida as well as those participating virtually as Florida continues to recover from Hurricane Ian. Led by the White House, the federal agencies have committed to ensuring they get relief efforts on the ground to help communities in need. Interior is proud to be part of the intergovernmental and bipartisan Everglades restoration effort, and along with its federal partners, brings resources, through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and annual appropriations, to build on the progress made by this Task Force over the last 26 years.

Secretary Deb Haaland welcomed everyone and said she appreciated those participating both in person and virtually so soon after the devastation caused by Hurricane Ian. They know that climate change is exacerbating extreme weather conditions like hurricanes, coastal erosion, and flooding risks and her heart goes out to everyone in Florida. She thanked each Task Force member for their continued dedication to the restoration of the South Florida Ecosystem. This Task Force represents a bipartisan intergovernmental commitment to ecosystem restoration and the work deserves to be celebrated. For three decades, the restoration community has made remarkable progress and Everglades restoration is the most successful large-scale ecosystem restoration ever attempted. The Biden Administration has a strong commitment to continue building on that progress and has provided more than \$1.8 billion to the Everglades in the first two years of this Administration. They would not be where they are today were it not for the 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. She looks forward to witnessing the beauty of the Everglades in person.

Congressman Brian Mast (via ZOOM) thanked the Task Force for its work over the years. He asked for diligence to ensure they are restoring more than what they are destroying. For example, the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) calls for recovering the submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) of Lake Okeechobee. If efforts to restore SAV requires massive discharges to Florida's coastal estuaries, then they will be destroying more seagrass than what is being restored in the lake. Moving water unnaturally and drowning 300-year-old pine islands in the Big Cypress to restore something somewhere else will also result in destroying more than they are restoring.

2. Ecological Conditions Update Following Hurricane Ian

Mr. Lawrence Glenn (SFWMD) provided an update on south Florida's ecological conditions following Hurricane Ian. The presentation included Hurricane Ian's effect on Lake Okeechobee, the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, Kissimmee River, the Caloosahatchee Estuary, Everglades water depths, WCA-3A Northeast, and Florida Bay salinity. A review of trends from previous events informed what they can expect in the coming months. For example, Lake Okeechobee had hurricane winds of 50 mph coming in from the south pushing water from the south of the

lake up against the north of the lake resulting in a 10-foot differential in water. They expect a decline in SAV over the next year. With the large inflow of water and nutrients into the system, they also anticipate a large-scale algae bloom sometime in April within Lake Okeechobee.

3. Momentum In Everglades Restoration

Mr. Drew Bartlett introduced a video that was jointly prepared by the SFMWD and the USACE on the significant progress that has been made to restore America's Everglades. COL James Booth recognized the efforts of this Task Force as well as those who have been in this fight for a long time. He noted the importance of the relationships built in the Everglades community which helped the USACE to respond after Hurricane Ian. Commissioner Kevin Ruane noted his area got hit with a Category 5 storm with wind gusts over 170 mph and storm surge of more than 12 feet. He said that the assistance from the USACE has been unbelievable following Hurricane Ian and thanked the COL and his team for all their help.

4. Member Introductions

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

Drew Bartlett for Ron Bergeron Sr., Governing Board Member, SFWMD

Bidisha Bhattacharyya for Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, U.S. Department of Agriculture (virtual attendee)

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

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

Nicole LeBoeuf, Assistant Administrator for NOAA's National Ocean Service, U.S. Department of Commerce

Curtis Osceola for Gene Duncan, Water Resources Director, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

Patty Power for Jim Shore, General Counsel to the Seminole Tribe of Florida

Kevin Ruane, Chairman, Lee County Commission (virtual attendee)

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

Gerald Solomon for Carlos Monje, Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, U.S. Department of Transportation

Eric Sutton, Special Advisor, Executive Director for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

5. Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) Update

Mr. Adam Gelber reviewed the reports required by WRDA 1996 and produced by OERI on behalf of the Task Force. The 2023 Cross Cut Budget and the 2022 Integrated Financial Plan are complete and posted at [Evergladesrestoration.gov](https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov). The 2022 Biennial Report was sent to

the Task Force for approval via e-mail and sent to OMB and DOI for clearance. Once the Biennial Report has been approved and cleared it will be posted and transmitted to Congress.

6. US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Update

Ms. Eva Velez reported that at the end of FY 22, the USACE executed approximately \$350 million worth of construction. She reviewed the FY 23 budget which includes \$407 million for construction and \$10.67 million for operations and maintenance and the BIL which includes an additional \$1.097 billion. On the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), an in-depth review was provided of projects currently in planning. The USACE and the SFWMD have signed the feasibility cost share agreement and kicked off the C&SF Flood Resiliency (Section 216) Study for the lower east coast that includes Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade counties. The C&SF system has been affected by sea-level change, The Southern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration Study (SEER) will be kicked off in September 2023 and will improve freshwater deliveries south and west into Everglades National Park and Shark River Slough to benefit the greater Everglades and Florida Bay. An in-depth review was also provided on those projects currently under design or construction and operations.

7. South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Update

Ms. Mindy Parrot reviewed the SFWMD's role in restoration as the non-federal sponsor and partner with the USACE on CERP and non-CERP federal projects, the C&SF Section 216 Infrastructure Resiliency Plan, operational planning, and the C&SF System operations and maintenance. Restoration Strategies is a series of projects to improve and expand the performance of stormwater treatment areas (STAs) to provide clean water for the Everglades. The SFWMD has completed 8 of the 13 projects and the rest will be completed by 2024. A review was provided on the IRL-South C-44 Reservoir and STA, the C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir, the Caloosahatchee Reservoir Water Quality Component, Central Everglades Planning Project, BBCW Cuter Wetlands, and LOWRP and associated ASR component. ASR is important for CERP, and they believe they can implement ASR guided by science in a phased approach to address uncertainties and reduce risk. The ASR Science Plan is designed to continue addressing uncertainties identified by the National Research Council.

Mr. Curtis Osceola noted the Miccosukee Tribe had submitted its concerns in writing over the potential risk for arsenic in the aquifer due to injections. Ms. Parrott replied that there is the potential with ASR to mobilize naturally occurring arsenic with the injection of the water. Mr. Drew Bartlett further explained that the USACE did a pilot project on the C-38 and there were arsenic detections that they were able to mitigate over time. The idea is to use that knowledge as well as knowledge from the other ASR wells in the state to mitigate that as they scale up.

8. Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) Update

COL Booth noted the purpose of the presentation was to consult with the Task Force on the Tentatively Selected Plan (TSP). He reviewed the project footprint and noted the regional significance of WERP includes, among other things, rehydrating the Native Area within the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Big Cypress Reservation based on the Tribe's Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) and decompartmentalizing the "triangle" area to reconnect areas of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida's Alligator Alley Reservation and treat thousands of acres of nuisance vegetation. Restoring the flow to this region is critical, they

have massive support among a broad array of stakeholders, and they will continue to address the risks as they refine the plan.

Mr. Steve Baisden reviewed the TSP, Alternative Hr (hybrid revised) which includes a blend of features assembled from the final array of alternatives, as well as changes based on updated modeling information, Tribal consultation, and stakeholder engagement. They are restoring an area the size of Rhode Island. Current project risks include:

- Wingate Mill Stormwater Treatment Area water availability and dry-out
- High quality forested wetlands located within the proposed Wingate Mill STA footprint
- Accurate implementation of water quality cost share policy
- Savings clause and real estate analysis
- National Historic Preservation Act consultation

The USACE and the SFWMD are collaborating to find a path forward to preserve the proposed benefits of WERP. The Chief's Report was scheduled for December 2023 for inclusion in WRDA 2024, but the schedule may change.

Secretary Shawn Hamilton said the state has unwavering support for WERP and offered to help in any way he could.

Ms. Patty Power said the Seminole Tribe appreciates all the effort in forging ahead with this project. Since the C&SF project, the native area has been cut off, particularly Kissimmee Billie Slough, from natural sheet flow. Low quality water is entering the Big Cypress Reservation through the North and West Feeder Canals. The native area is losing natural habitat and invasive species continue to spread. The need for WERP is still very much there and the Tribe wants to continue to work with everyone. It is essential to re-hydrate the Kissimmee Billie Slough which is of great cultural significance to Tribal members. This is the most pristine habitat the Seminole Tribe owns and without hydration, the native area is expected to continue its decline. The Seminole Tribe asked that the project not get delayed again so that it will get into WRDA 2024. It is critical that there is enough funding for the work to continue. WERP has suffered a high level of misinformation and the Tribe urged the SFWMD and USACE to continue relying on the data.

Mr. Drew Bartlett thanked the USACE for its perseverance on WERP, the SFWMD is already working to build part of this project due to its importance. Ms. Tanya Trujillo noted it was the sense of the Task Force at a previous meeting that WERP move forward, and it is still the position of this Task Force to move this project forward.

Mr. Curtis Osceola noted the Miccosukee Tribe is concerned WERP won't make it into WRDA 2024. They are also concerned with the plume coming out of the L-28 and the interceptor. As a contingency, they should think about investing in mitigation of the plume to combat invasive fauna that is inundating that area and a lot of their ancestral lands. It is causing a great deal of degradation to the tree islands. The Tribe is willing to do the work but needs the funding.

Public Comment

In-person commenters:

Mr. Mike Elfenbein (Cypress Chapter Izaak Walton League) stated they support Everglades restoration initiatives and are supportive of the intent of WERP. They are interested in seeing

the rehydration of Lostmans Slough south of Tamiami Trail. The inequality among concerns of the stakeholders over the development of this project led to the delays with WERP. They share the concern over the development of the STA on pristine habitats that are part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Also concerned with water quality and introducing high nutrient waters into a low nutrient, rain driven system. Much of the demand for this STA comes from data from the late 1990s and mid-2000s. That data would suggest that nutrient levels in these water bodies at that time were significantly higher than recent studies. There are concerns that the failure of private landowners to accept those flowage easements may lead to imminent domain and loss of their property. The Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) is also suffering from invasive species because of the C&SF project. In much the same way that they will mitigate that plume at the end of the L-28, he hopes they will find a way to add funding to mitigate invasive species in BCNP.

Mr. Tom Oates (private landowner in BCNP) said they need to address the pollution issue at the source. The treatment area should be outside of the area where this STA is proposed. He urged this TF to strongly consider that any reliance on the state to do any of this work be a condition precedent to any of the work being done in the northern WERP footprint. If the state doesn't do its part and this canal is backfilled, they will have issues at the plug. As the Miccosukee Tribe pointed out, they have a plume of invasives at the bottom which immediately needs treatment. The BCNP can't maintain what they have now and will not be able to address the introduction of new nutrients. The TSP does not address the water coming off the Reservation. They are entitled to and frankly the Reservation exists because of this drainage and if that drainage continues, it will result in an inundation of nutrients to the preserve.

*Ms. Cara Capp (National Parks Conservation Association) provided comments.

**Due to a technical glitch our recording did not capture the comments made by Ms. Cara Capp.*

Ms. Caitlan Newcamp (Audubon Florida) said that Audubon appreciates the presentations on momentum and progress as it is an exciting time to be a part of this restoration program. With unprecedented state and federal funding, they are happy to see projects in all the different phases. Hurricane Ian has shown them where they can bolster their resiliency efforts to lessen the impacts of extreme weather. Protecting the Everglades protects us, safeguarding our communities as a buffer from storm surge and flooding. Audubon hopes the TF will consider the effects of Hurricane Ian to develop a more comprehensive resiliency strategy for south Florida going forward. Audubon is here as a resource and teammate to further one of the greatest restoration initiatives of our time.

Commissioner Sarah Heard (Martin County Commission) said it was a pleasure to see the current spirit of cooperation. She said that it was wonderful to be back in person and she is thankful for the robust federal and state funding and the support for the projects in IRL-South, which is the most biodiverse estuary in North America. They must look to the next phase of IRL-South which is the natural lands component which they hope will be in the next WRDA. One of the promises of Everglades restoration was that they would recreate healthy habitat to support the nesting birds that once populated the Everglades. In south Florida, over development has made that impossible, the lands are too fragmented and too expensive. Martin County has pursued very strict growth management policies with a strong urban service boundary and their western lands are relatively unimpacted and inexpensive. They look forward to recreating those 90,000 acres of wetlands and muck removal in the IRL.

Mr. David Houghton (Wild Landscapes International) said they applaud the efforts of the SFWMD and the USACE on the WERP. It is imperative that they move more clean water onto the Seminole and Miccosukee lands. They are working with landowners to place perpetual conservation easements on multi-generational ranches. Florida has some of the best conservation science in the world and the critical land identification project (CLIP) rates the lands they are talking about as priority 1 lands. The Florida Ecological Greenways project/Florida Wildlife Corridor also rates the lands as priority 1. These lands are outstanding with huge old cypress trees and lots of black bears. The location of the proposed Wingate Mill STA is right over these lands. Wild Landscapes International encourages the SFWMD and the USACE to look at other alternatives and find lands that are not as unique and pristine.

Virtual public commenters:

Mr. Neal McAliley (Bergeron Everglades Foundation) said that while WERP is a good project, the current design of the Wingate Mill STA feature will do more harm than good. That STA feature will be located on top of a portion of the Kissimmee Billie Strand that is pristine old growth forest, with trees documented as more than 500-years old, and a bio-diversity hot spot. Visitors to that site will tell you it rivals anything in Corkscrew Swamp. That area will have to be cleared of vegetation and graded to allow for water treatment and the strand will no longer exist. There is no precedent in south Florida where a pristine natural area like this has been destroyed in the name of Everglades restoration. That STA will not work to improve water quality at that location because of the sandy soils and dry-out, which may make the water quality worse not better. He asked that the Corps come up with a different plan for the STA feature.

Ms. Elise Pretty (ranch owner) said that while she is not an adjacent landowner and is 30 miles to the west, she would be affected by WERP indirectly. She is opposed to the way WERP wants to achieve those water quality goals. This area will be sacrificed for the Wingate Mill STA and she asked that it be removed from WERP.

Ms. Diana Umpierre (Sierra Club) said this project should remain a top priority for both agencies and wants the STA water quality component to happen and for the cost-share issues to be resolved. It is crazy to consider ecosystem restoration separate from water quality. Concerns about willing sellers must not limit the agencies from evaluating potential alternatives on where to put the STAs. Much noise has been made by certain stakeholders making the EAA Reservoir sound far more important than WERP. Government agencies must listen to both Tribes who still live in the heart of the Everglades and follow their guidance. Sierra Club echoes the calls to not delay WERP again.

Mr. Jeff Dixon (landowner in the footprint of the Wingate spillway) said no developer would ask for a permit to destroy sensitive wetlands. When Florida Power and Light builds solar farms, they are required to work around environmentally sensitive areas. This Task Force has been told that this area needs more water, but that is not true because they have high water marks on 500-year-old cypress trees. If the Tribe would like more water through the Kissimmee Billie Strand, why are they requiring an operable culvert be placed there. Most of the water quality information they have been given is dated. They have conducted independent third-party water quality testing in the last few months and have found that the water going onto the Miccosukee Reservation trust land and Seminole Reservation has less than 20ppb. While he wants to see this project move forward, he does not want more water than God and nature intended.

Ms. Nyla Pipes (One Florida Foundation) stated that many are up in arms over the idea of moving a plan forward that places the STA, that may or may not be needed, on top of old growth cypress trees. Moving polluted water from an upstream location downstream. She agrees with the Gladesmen that moving this water downstream into the Big Cypress is not solving the problem. Another project, the C-23/C-44 interconnect canal, is a very small project that was shoehorned into place because it is necessary for the EAA Reservoir. It is needed because they are removing water from St. Lucie County that would otherwise hit the St. Lucie River. The plan is to connect the C-23 canal to the C-44 STA and Reservoir during the wet season, when it currently can't even treat the water from the C-44 canal. St. Lucie and Martin counties have not had the opportunity to look at the C-23/C-44 project closely enough.

Mr. Daniel Watson (resident) commented on the amount of water that WERP is planning to pump into the Big Cypress. The Everglades is half the size that it was historically, and they can't send historical volumes of water to an area that is half the size without raising the water to an unnatural level. Higher water means all the fur bearing animals will be packed closer together. This area is a rain driven hardwood hammock with pines and palmettos. With higher water levels, they will have trouble with the prescribed fires many of these plant communities depend on for survival. They cannot build the Wingate STA in the name of restoration. They cannot replace that pristine habitat or re-grow old growth cypress trees.

Ms. Heather Cleckler (Wingate Mill Ranch landowner) said she is a fifth-generation cattle rancher on the land where they plan to put the STA for WERP. Throughout this meeting, she has heard about the importance of communicating and collaborating, yet she knew nothing of this project until the public meeting in August. The data being used includes a few samples from over 10 years ago and a flyover. She has personally seen 11 of the 22 endangered species on that land. She asked that they find some other solution.

Mr. Robert Markum (resident) said he was born and raised in south Florida and his travels and experiences have taught him that nothing compares to what he has in his backyard. They all agree that they need to save the Everglades and correct the mistakes from the previous generation. There has never been an STA built on untouched, pristine habitat. Placement of the Wingate Mill STA is in the wrong location. If the location of the STA is not moved, it will result in the killing of panthers, bears, migrating birds, turkeys, bobcats, tortoises, alligators, orchids, and cypress older than this country. This is a fragile ecosystem that cannot handle flooding with polluted water. The Wingate Mill STA is not the answer, he asked that they not take and destroy his land.

Mr. Newton Cook (United Water Fowlers) said it was a shock when he heard about the proposed Wingate Mill STA. Lake Okeechobee, the heart of the Everglades, is also going to be destroyed because the water is going to be held too high for too long under LOSOM. When the water in Lake Okeechobee is held over 15 feet for just a few days, it begins to kill the vegetation in the lake. They lost over 85% of the SAV in Lake Okeechobee due to Hurricane Irma. Five years later they still don't have all the vegetation back. LOSOM will not be good for the ecology of Lake Okeechobee. Every drop of water going south, east, or west will be dirtier. They need to keep the water where it was for decades without any problems.

Mr. Joe Frank (Big Cypress Reservation resident) said that while he supports the overall concept of WERP, he is opposed to the TSP. As a resident, he would like the cleanest inflow of water going through the Big Cypress Reservation. The TSP only focuses on rehydrating a small

corner of the reservation. This TSP will turn the Big Cypress Reservation into a depository for the dirtiest water coming off the agricultural lands to the northeast of the Reservation. The restoration effort needs to focus on cleaning up the water at the source. The Everglades and Big Cypress ecosystem is a rain driven, sheetflow ecosystem. Things such as ASR and compartmentalization work against nature and will eventually fail.

Mr. Jake Fojtik (Florida Farm Bureau Federation) said the Federation supports the continuation of agricultural production on the EAA, C-139 basin, and the northern Everglades. They support Everglades restoration including CERP. Agriculture is essential to Florida's economy and the national safe, abundant, and affordable food supply. Agricultural lands provide a host of environmental benefits such as invasive species control, wildlife habitat, surface water storage, and groundwater recharge. It is imperative that when agricultural lands are going to be affected, farmers and ranchers have ample notice and time to plan for how this will affect their businesses and livelihood. A genuine effort should be made to exclude landowners who want to retain their properties and to make sure that landowners within proximity to the project's footprint boundary are unaffected by flood, water table fluctuations, and flow alterations. They asked for more time for stakeholder input.

Ms. Meredith Budd (Florida Wildlife Federation) underscored the Florida Wildlife Federation's support for WERP. It's a key component of CERP and has a multitude of benefits namely restoring the hydrology in the western Everglades and addressing water quality issues that have been caused by high nutrient loading. BCNP and all the connected lands within the region will benefit from these necessary improvements to the ecosystem. The federation is committed to supporting western Everglades restoration and supports a final solution that can help realize the much-anticipated benefits of this project. The Florida Wildlife Federation encourages the USACE to forge ahead with the study and find solutions with little to no delay.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Gladesman and property owner within the Big Cypress) said he grew up in the heart of the Kissimmee Billie as did his father and grandfather. The Gladesmen and the property owners in and around WERP were excluded. They agree that science must lead and control the way, but the science is outdated and incomplete. They want this project to move forward because it is critical, but he urged them to turn away from the Wingate Mill STA and look for a more appropriate site. They intend to support the Miccosukee Tribe's concerns over exotics and support the NPS with their need for additional funding to treat invasive exotics.

Mr. Ed Swakon (environmental engineer) said he represents several property owners within the BBSEER study area. They ask the TF and those agency representatives planning restoration projects to take into consideration that the private sector can contribute to achieving CERP and BBSEER objectives. Private sector developers can provide CERP and BBSEER benefits quicker than through public restoration projects. The private sector should not be held hostage if they are within footprints of study areas.

9. RECOVER Update

Dr. Gina Ralph reminded everyone that RECOVER conducts system-wide evaluations to inform CERP planning and implementation and coordinates and communicates that science to guide achievement of CERP goals. The performance measures, predictive models, and tools are continually updated with science collected by their monitoring and assessment plan (MAP) as well as outside research. She explained how RECOVER is organized and how the CERP footprint is divided into modules with similar landscapes. In October 2021, RECOVER initiated

development of the Southwest Florida module to apply RECOVER's programmatic evaluations and assessment framework to the greater Big Cypress Basin.

The current MAP scope continues at a reduced level relative to the original MAP and doesn't encompass all the indicator monitoring, spatial and temporal scales that were originally planned. The USACE currently manages 18 agreements and the President's Budget for adaptive assessment and monitoring for FY 23 is \$5 million. The SFWMD manages 12 agreements worth approximately \$1.3 million and not all of those are funded in a recurring budget. In the original development of the MAP, there was an assumption that other agencies would be doing monitoring to help track restoration success. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. MAP products are used beyond CERP and directly support this Task Force's System-wide Indicator Report and Biennial Report. They need people to lead and support RECOVER teams now that they are moving from project planning to design, implementation, and operations. RECOVER also needs money for additional monitoring that is needed and estimates it needs \$10.5 million on an annual basis for the adaptive assessment and monitoring. RECOVER asked the TF to direct the SCG to:

- Assign members within their agencies to assist with RECOVER teams and products
- Provide RECOVER with an inventory of agency monitoring
- Host a RECOVER topic workshop on monitoring in Summer 2023

10. Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS)

Dr. Tabitha Elkington reviewed the working draft of the 2022 IDS. The IDS reflects an optimized schedule and sequencing strategy for planning, design, and construction based on engineering and science. The IDS serves the purpose of the Master Implementation Sequencing Plan described in the Yellow Book and is a forward-looking document. Investments by the USACE and Interior as well as non-federal investments by the SFWMD total \$6.3 billion for South Florida Ecosystem Restoration (SFER) through FY 21. The final 2022 IDS will be released on November 18, 2022, at the Task Force Sponsored IDS Workshop.

11. Herbert Hoover Dike (HHD) Rehabilitation Project and Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM)

Ms. Ingrid Bon reminded everyone of the project goals which are to safeguard human life while reducing the intolerable risk of social, economic, and environmental impacts to areas around Lake Okeechobee and impacts to the Everglades ecosystem. She acknowledged the contributions of the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes to the success of this project. FDEP contributed \$100 million that together with the supplemental funding allowed the USACE to move completion of this project up by 3 years. Construction is 97% complete for all risk reduction work. The construction data will be provided to FEMA so they can update the Florida insurance maps which will result in flood insurance being more economical for communities surrounding Lake Okeechobee. Construction completion of the HHD is one of the requirements for implementation of the LOSOM. The Task Force will be invited to the celebration planned for January.

Mr. Tim Gysan reminded everyone that the goal is to incorporate flexibility in lake operations while balancing congressionally authorized project purposes. There are four study objectives:

1. Manage risk to public health and safety, life, and property

2. Continue to meet authorized purposes for navigation, recreation, and flood control
3. Improve water supply performance
4. Enhance ecology in Lake Okeechobee, northern estuaries, and across the South Florida Ecosystem.

He reviewed the LOSOM planning process which started in 2019. They looked at over 75 performance metrics and the take-away is that they will see improvement across the board in all areas. The one exception is with lake ecology, and it is a concern. Lake performance is very climate dependent and LOSOM aims to achieve synergy with project purposes and maximize system-wide benefits with available water and flexible water management operations. They intend to use all available information such as current climate conditions and weather forecasts to make informed decisions. They received over 4,000 comments during the draft EIS NEPA review period which ended in September 2022. The final EIS is scheduled for February 2023, followed by public review in spring 2023 and the record of decision in April 2023.

12. WRDA 2020 Implementation – Invasive Species

Mr. Adam Gelber stated that WRDA 2020 directs the Task Force 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. OERI has convened a group of experts who have identified existing priority lists and a path forward to create a prevention priority list. The prevention list will be refined for the next Task Force meeting. An early detection rapid response and an established species refinement process will take place in 2023.

13. Working Group (WG) and Science Coordination Group (SCG) Update

Mr. James Erskine reported on the joint meetings of the WG/SCG in July and September that included updates on the restoration program and projects. The charter was approved for the Florida Coral Reef Coordination Team, and they are in the process of identifying the team chair and members. Because of the dense WG/SCG agendas with tight schedules, the chairs have been discussing the meeting structure and the possibility of having multi-day meetings. A Task Force Sponsored Public Engagement IDS workshop is scheduled for November 18, 2022, which allows creates the opportunity for further public engagement.

Mr. Lawrence Glenn said the SCG convenes scientific workshops, participates in RECOVER, and participates in independent scientific meetings and conferences to learn what is being done elsewhere to bring that information to bear on what they are doing with Everglades science. They participate in the development of ecological models and different metrics that are used to evaluate projects from a scientific standpoint. They utilize scientific panels and experts to review their products and helped coordinate the science on the significance of flow to Everglades restoration. Current activities include determining impacts of Hurricane Ian.

14. National Research Council (NRC) Report

Mr. Bob Johnson reminded everyone that WRDA 2000 required independent scientific review of Everglades restoration progress. The NRC established the Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress (CISRERP) which has produced eight reports. In this report, CISRERP is continuing its focus on science support for CERP decision making as they transition from planning to implementation, and operational testing. An in-depth

review was provided of the topics covered at each of the CISRERP meetings. CISRERP is finalizing their report, ninth biennial review, which will be provided to the sponsoring agencies by November. All the presentations and ZOOM meetings are available at:

[Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress IX | National Academies](#)

Public Comment

Virtual public commenters:

Kali Parrish spoke on behalf of Mr. Ronnie Bergeron because he had laryngitis. She said that his prayers were with all Floridians on the west coast who were affected by Hurricane Ian. He thanked the TF for all its hard work and looked forward to seeing everyone at the next meeting.

Ms. Diana Umpierre (Sierra Club) said she was glad RECOVER spoke about their needs and the important role they play in Everglades restoration. She asked for RECOVER reports to be easily accessible to the public.

Nyla Pipes (One Florida Foundation) said that Lake Okeechobee gets the short end of the deal with LOSOM. It is alarming to hear that LOSOM will keep Lake Okeechobee too high, too often and they are going to kill the liquid heart of the Everglades.

In-person commenters:

Mike Elfenbein (Cypress Chapter - Izaak Walton League) reminded everyone that while they are working hard on Everglades restoration to put more water on the landscape, prescribed fire is an important part of the landscape. For the last 40-years the Big Cypress landscape has been timbered, ranched, farmed, and developed. To this day they are still using the old rail beds used to transport cypress logs to build PT Boats during WWII. They are using some of the world's largest machinery for seepage barriers, road removal, and earth digging. They need to manage invasive species and asked that they leave all treatment options on the table. Interior has a proposal for wilderness designations in BCNP and he fears this designation will preclude Everglades restoration from achieving its goals by limiting the equipment and machinery available to do those projects. In addition, it will limit the ability of the agency, which has minimal resources, to manage invasive species. Those wilderness designations will preclude their ability to properly manage the resources and should not be applied here.

Ms. Jessica Pinsky (Captains for Clean Water) noted her organization was founded in a time of water quality crisis that was causing immense damage to the northern estuaries. Although they are not always in 100% agreement, this community is united and has a shared common goal, Everglades restoration. The Captains for Clean water community, headquartered in Ft. Myers, was directly impacted by Hurricane Ian and they are currently working to restore the fishing guides, businesses and the community become whole again. They are more vigilant now than ever to threats to progress on Everglades restoration and clean water. As our community and businesses rebuild, their economy will need clean and healthy estuaries and a restored Everglades. She congratulated the agencies for nearing the finish line with LOSOM and breaking ground on several projects. She urged they complete those projects that will provide relief to the northern estuaries and send more water south to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

Mr. Bradley Watson (The Everglades Foundation) said it is a time of incredible momentum with record funding, bipartisan support, and a focused community. While these projects are

completed and ribbons are cut, they see the immediate value to the ecology and the clean water economy of Florida that they support and enhance. The challenge is not continuing this momentum but increasing it through this decade. They support WERP and hope the concerns raised are heard. On LOSOM, they commend the USACE and the SFWMD for a thorough and transparent public process. Once LOSOM is implemented, it will show significant improvement to lake management, especially in its ability to reduce harmful discharges. When completed, the EAA Reservoir will be a game changer for water management in south Florida and for Everglades restoration and they hope it is given the highest priority for completion.

Ms. Kellie Ralston (Bonefish & Tarpon Trust) said Florida is the 'Fishing Capital of the World' and fishing has an economic impact in the Florida Keys of almost \$500M so there's a strong connection between Everglades restoration and the health of that fishery and habitats. Everglades restoration is a high priority, and they are excited about the progress due to the great federal and state partnership and unprecedented funding.

Next Steps and Closing Comments

Adam Gelber reminded everyone that approval of the May 2022 meeting summary would be approved via e-mail. They are awaiting concurrence for transmittal of the Biennial Report. OERI is working on the meeting schedule for 2023 and hope to have the next Task Force meeting on the west coast of Florida. Everyone was invited to attend the reception.

To view the webcast in its entirety and access power point presentations and handouts, please visit: [Task Force — Everglades Restoration Initiatives](#)

Meeting adjourned at 4:50 PM

Handouts:

- TF Agenda
- May 2022 Draft Task Force meeting summary
- South Florida Ecological Conditions Update
- TF membership roster
- OERI update
- USACE Program and Project Update
- USACE Western Everglades Restoration Project
- Seminole Tribe Western Everglades Restoration Project
- Seminole Tribe letter in support of WERP
- RECOVER Update
- Herbert Hoover Dike and Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual presentation
- WRDA 2020 – Invasive Species presentation and legislation
- Report on WG and SCG activities
- NRC Report