

Draft Meeting Summary
South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force
Stewart Lee Udall Department of the Interior Bldg.
Yates Auditorium
Washington, DC
November 15, 2023

1. Welcome and Introductions

Ms. Shannon Estenoz called the meeting to order at 9:02 AM. She is the Asst. Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks and oversees the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service (NPS). She welcomed everyone to the Stuart Udall Department of the Interior building. She has been working on Everglades issues for about 25 years and it is lovely to be back. She thought she spoke fluent Everglades but in the last 2 ½ years, several new acronyms have come to the floor. It is wonderful to be back working with everyone on the Everglades. She reviewed some administrative items and recognized Ms. Anna Normand from the Congressional Research Service who was in attendance.

Secretary Shawn Hamilton said they are fortunate to have Ms. Estenoz serving as chair because of her passion, energy, and commitment to the Everglades. He welcomed the state and federal partners, NGOs, as well as the stakeholders who were present. The USACE and the SFWMD put together a video, Achievements in Everglades Restoration, 2023, which highlights the benefits of their investments.

Ms. Estenoz welcomed new Task Force members: Roger Young, Holly Smith, Senator Rene Garcia, and Stacey Brown who is the alternate for Assistant Secretary Michael Connor. She welcomed a group of students from the Emerging Leaders Program at Florida International University. She recognized elected officials: Karson Turner, Hendry County Commissioner, Doug Smith and Sarah Heard, Martin County Commissioners, and Mike Elfenbein, Chairman of the Charlotte County Soil and Water Conservation District.

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:

Shannon Estenoz, Task Force Chair and Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, 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

Stacey Brown for 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

Rene Garcia, Commissioner, Miami Dade County

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

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

Department of Transportation

*Sean Corson for 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*

Holly Smith, Councilwoman, City of Sanibel

Roger Young, 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

3. Approval of June 2023 Meeting Summary

The June 2023 meeting summary was presented for approval. A motion was made and seconded and the June 2023 meeting summary was approved without objection.

4. Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) Update

- *Cross Cut Budget and Integrated Financial Plan*

Mr. Adam Gelber reported the 2024 Cross-Cut Budget and the 2023 Integrated Financial Plan (IFP) have been finalized and are posted on the web at: www.Evergladesrestoration.gov.

The Cross Cut Budget is required annually by the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1996 and provides coordinated budget requests for Everglades restoration efforts by federal and state agencies represented on the Task Force. The IFP is also required annually by the WRDA 1996 and provides detailed project sheets for federal, state, Tribal, and local government restoration projects that contribute to the Task Force's three strategic goals.

- *Implementing Sec 504, Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2020 – Invasive Risk Assessment, Prioritization and Management*

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. Using guidance issued by the Task Force and the Working Group (WG)/Science Coordination Group (SCG), the OERI is facilitating a team of subject matter experts to accomplish this task. The experts tackled prevention species first using horizon scanning, which combines risk screening and consensus building to prioritize threats based on the likelihood of arrival and negative ecological and sociological impacts. They developed an initial list of prevention species along with recommendations. Next steps include a science-based prioritization (Early Detection/Rapid Response and established species) tool development, a focus on system-wide ecological indicators, and revisiting the prevention list.

- *Task Force Charter*

The Task Force charter was updated to reflect WRDA 2020 and WRDA 2022 which added the Invasive Species language, Section 2(h), new Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission representative, Section 4(a)(3), and ethics responsibilities of members, Section 7.

- **2024 Meeting Calendar**

Mr. Gelber reviewed the proposed 2024 meeting schedule for the Task Force, WG, and SCG.

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

Ms. Eva Velez noted FY23 saw the largest investment the USACE has ever made to Everglades restoration. In FY24 the USACE will advance program level activities, planning, design and construction, and Operations and Maintenance (O&M) together with their partners. Their budget for this FY is \$415 million from the President's Budget for construction and just under \$13 million for O&M. She highlighted the unique partnership the USACE has with the SFWMD to share in the O&M of the constructed features of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was a transformational investment providing this program with an additional \$1.097 billion.

The 2023 Integrated Delivery Schedule is officially being launched at this meeting. In FY24 the USACE is well positioned to award very large contracts such as the large embankment of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir that includes the C-11 Impoundment and the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) South and Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP) South. The Second Periodic CERP Update will be conducted to ensure that the plan's goals are achieved with new or updated modeling that includes the latest available scientific, technical, and planning information. The first update was done in 2005 and a lot has been learned since then. This is not a modification of CERP but a technical evaluation of CERP. They will report on their progress as this effort moves along over the next several years. An in-depth review was provided on those projects in planning and operations across the landscape.

On the Western Everglades Restoration Plan (WERP), COL Booth reported that at the recent Project Delivery Team (PDT) meeting on the 1st of November there was over 2 hours of comments from interested stakeholders and everyone is being heard. Some of the key comments included slow, late, or not enough engagement with property owners in the study area, particularly the western feeder area of the project. They heard concerns about what's going on with the water quality and where that water will eventually go, the effects of those depths, and the impacts of moving forward. Stakeholders also asked for more information as they go through multiple iterations of the WERP. They heard support from a lot of folks to move forward with everything except the Western Feeder Area. The C&SF effort involves a lot of folks working every single day with about 9 to 11 million stakeholders involved in that effort. They are going to do their absolute best to engage with all of them as much as they possibly can. He reviewed the upcoming schedule for stakeholder engagement and asked that they continue the conversations. He explained that Feasibility Studies provide Congress a general understanding of what the project will look like and what the costs are. If the Congress gives them the authority, that's when they will take it from 30% to 100% design. They acknowledge it's going to take more face-to-face engagement and they are looking forward to hearing from interested stakeholders during the public comment period.

Ms. Velez reported on the C&SF Flood Resilience Program which includes the C&SF Flood Resiliency (Section 216) Study and the WRDA 2022, Section 8214 Comprehensive C&SF Study. The Section 216 Study is ongoing in Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade counties and the objectives are: to reduce flood risks and damages resulting from the combination of rainfall runoff, storm surge, high tide, and/or high-water table to residences, businesses, and critical infrastructure; and to reduce potential life safety risk due to flooding as a result of the combination of rainfall runoff, storm surge, high tides, and/or water table. The study is on a 4-year schedule and budget of \$11.3 million with target completion for WRDA 2026. They received authorization for a new Comprehensive C&SF Study in WRDA 2022 and hope to start

that study in FY25 if they receive funding. It is a multipurpose project focus on short-term and long-term solutions for community resiliency. It will focus on flood risk management, water supply, ecosystem restoration, saltwater intrusion, and recreation. It will include 18 counties and inland and coastal areas covering ~18,000 square miles.

COL Booth noted the Miccosukee Water Conservation Area (WCA) 3A has been higher than what is typical for this time of year because of the wet conditions in September which brought water elevations up for the entire system. Stakeholders are concerned about impacts on tree islands and the environment. They have had a lot of discussions with federal and state agencies and have arrived at a three-prong approach that includes a temporary plan deviation.

Ms. Stacey Brown reiterated how important the WERP effort is to Secretary Connor adding that it is one of his highest priorities. He recognizes how important it is to deliver an implementable solution and meeting the needs of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida and the Seminole Tribe and advance a solution that will be supported by our partners, NGOs, and others. The work is continuing as they process the exemption request. It is Secretary Connor's goal to make sure they have something for the Congress to act on in their next WRDA.

Ms. Patty Power noted the Seminole Tribe's investment in WERP dates back nearly 30 years and the Tribe has actively participated in the project formulation and planning. They recognize the huge challenge when dealing with 18,000 square miles and 9-10 million people. This project sits outside of the map that was used for modeling for the Yellow Book. Although they had a lot of data, there was a lot of data that was and is still missing. The Seminole Tribe looks forward to continuing working with the USACE and to help continue to fill in those gaps and get a better understanding of what is needed for the environment and the people that live there.

Mr. Kevin Cunniff noted the planned deviation under Combined Operations Plan (COP) that is being pursued was spearheaded by the Miccosukee Tribe and some of the landowners, Mr. Bergeron being one, who continue to be concerned about high water in the southern part of the system because of the inability to move water across Tamiami Trail. Chairman Talbert Cyprus received an incredibly positive response from agency heads. While they are pursuing the deviation for this season, this has been a problem that the Miccosukee Tribe has been advocating needs a solution. For 30 years, the Tree Islands within this landscape that are the cultural and literal home of the Miccosukee Tribal community have degraded significantly. They have seen the death and changing of vegetation on these islands. While it is important that they are pursuing this deviation for this season where they can expect a strong El Nino will give them more rainfall, right now, South Florida is getting 3 to 8 inches of rain. Water conditions-based management of the system must be the way going forward. They want to be proactive not reactive in how operation planning proceeds and want to see triggers put into the operational plan. The Miccosukee Tribe wants holistic restoration, decompartmentalization of the system, the restoration of water quality so that water can support, not degrade the mosaic of habitats. Even though there are high recession rates in the north, they still have water flooding tree islands in the south. He applauds that they will continue with this planned deviation.

As for Picayune Strand, while this has been one of those projects that has a long-standing history of effort and focused attention, he thinks they are at the cusp of closing the book on a rather painful chapter of this CERP project which resulted in the taking of 805 acres of Miccosukee land back in the mid-90s which is managed within the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve. There is support from most agencies to return those lands back to the Miccosukee

Tribe and the money is still sitting in account since the Tribe is unable to constitutionally sell land. He is pleased that it seems they are on a path toward final resolution.

Ms. Estenoz added she is excited about Biscayne Bay Southeastern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration (BBSEER). She congratulated the team for the great progress. Miami-Dade County is an important player, and they are grateful for the wonderful cooperation and partnership. It is the hope of the NPS, that as they are looking at alternative components, that they find a way to look at options for nature-based solutions, such as coastal wetland rehydration and technologies that a few years from now might seem a lot smarter and more resilient than even now. They are learning from Everglades restoration that the more flexibility they give themselves 10 years down the road when you're building something, the better.

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

Ms. Mindy Parrott noted the SFWMD is a unique non-federal sponsor for the USACE and they work together, not only in planning, but also modeling, design, operation, monitoring, assessment for CERP and Foundation Projects like the Kissimmee River Restoration, C-111 South Dade, as well as the upcoming resiliency studies. The SFWMD works with other state agencies, cities, and counties on Restoration Strategies, Northern Everglades and Estuaries Programs, local projects, dispersed water management, and other local and state projects.

In early 2023, Governor DeSantis challenged the SFWMD to expedite storage for the Everglades, emphasizing projects that would reduce harmful discharges to the estuaries. The SFWMD took on the EAA Reservoir Pump Station as well as the IRL S C-23/C-24 South Reservoir. The SFWMD is preparing a Feasibility Study under Section 203 of WRDA to expedite northern storage in the Lake Okeechobee Component A Reservoir (LOCAR). The study was started in early 2023 and is almost at the finish line. Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) is also very important for Lake Okeechobee and CERP and the SFWMD is dedicated to moving ASR science along through the science plan and through the work they are doing with the USACE's Engineer Research Development Center.

Updates were provided on the Caloosahatchee (C-43) Reservoir, projects that would help restore the IRL and St. Lucie River, Central Everglades EAA Reservoir and STA, CEPP North, CEPP New Water Seepage Barrier Wall, projects to restore water flow to Biscayne Bay, and projects to restore the Loxahatchee River Watershed. An update was provided on Restoration Strategies, a series of features and improvements to Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) to better manage flow so that they can provide the water quality treatment that is needed for the Everglades. Of the 13 facilities, 10 have been completed and two are still under construction. State and local projects intended to restore water resources were also reported on.

Mr. Drew Bartlett noted they have contracts for several components of the EAA Reservoir on the December Governing Board agenda. This is how they will get water from Lake Okeechobee to the EAA reservoir at the volumes they envision. A lot of conversation at this meeting was on the water levels in WCA 3A. They have done the seepage wall, removed old Tamiami Trail and have worked a lot to move water into Everglades National Park. They are installing three more culverts on the L-28 levee on the southwest side of WCA 3A giving them the opportunity to move even more water in the Big Cypress Preserve.

Mr. Ron Bergeron said that a lot of projects were started decades ago but they were not getting the benefits of what was already built. With the leadership of the state agencies and the federal

partners, they are on the threshold of implementing Modified Water Deliveries. They are already at the first stage where the L-29 can be raised to create more flow moving south. He is very excited they are getting close to the second stage where the water will flow by gravity all the way from the Broward-Palm Beach line across 50 miles of ridge and slough.

Ms. Holly Smith noted they have run into some complications for the C-43 but have gotten through those and moved ahead. West Coast benefits will come with the completion of C-43.

Ms. Estenoz recognized former Task Force Chair, Dr. Tim Petty, now with the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, and Mr. Connor Tomlinson with Senator Rubio's office.

Public Comment - In-Person

Mr. Marshall Jones' (Max Fish Camp and WCA 3B) family has lived in the Everglades for five generations and many of these projects will directly affect their ability to live and recreate there. They have seen tremendous loss of wildlife and habitat and ecological changes due to high water events and other agency actions. He is concerned that some projects will further harm the remaining delicate upland habitats. They have gone from flocks of birds that could black out the sky to hardly a tree full during the rookery season. They have had a 90% or higher loss of alligator nests due to high water level events over the last 6 years. He urged everyone to continue working and communicating together.

Mr. Bradley Watson (Everglades Foundation) noted the Foundation supports Everglades restoration through science, advocacy, and education. He encouraged people to go see Marshall Jones' wonderful place. He is thrilled with restoration progress and momentum due in part to bipartisan support, resulting funding, and the strong community of stakeholders. America's Everglades is a national example of large-scale ecosystem restoration and project completions are showing quick results and benefits for Florida's ecology, clean water, and economy. They are excited to see progress on the EAA Reservoir and look forward to 2030 when they can store, clean, and send that water south. They support WERP moving forward as well as the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) which will send more water south, reducing harmful discharges and impacts on those communities.

Mr. Ron Bergeron (Bergeron Everglades Foundation) recognized his wife and daughter who were with him. He thanked COL Booth for coming to the Kissimmee Billie and seeing the 500-year-old trees. They need to make sure they are not destroying a natural environment in the name of restoration. He is disappointed that there was little communication with the ~ 50 property owners. He complimented the property owners, many of whom have lived in this area for over a century. It is extremely important for Everglades restoration and WERP to go forward. The Western Weir needs to be studied and he hoped they could figure out a solution.

Ms. Heather Cleckler (WERP stakeholder) noted she and her family live within the WERP project footprint and inside the 30,000 acres of cattle ranch, there are 1,200 acres for panther mitigation and conservation easements that cannot be flooded. They have conducted their own research and the back filling of the canal will flood their land. She refuses for this plan to go forward until 100% of the plan is ready because if it fails, it will be her livelihood and her home.

Mr. Dixon (WERP stakeholder) noted that the goal of WERP is to return to 1940s sheet flow which is impossible since back then, water would rise during normal summer rainfall to the high-

water mark 9 out of 10 years as it does now and not exceed that 500-year-old high watermark except during major rain events like a hurricane. Excess water flowed south and also to the east and west through sloughs and rivers into the Gulf and Atlantic. Since the 1940s, coastal development filled in most of those rivers and canals dug in the Everglades became the primary means of flood protection. This plan would fill in canals that are this ecosystem's only flood protection and build a dike (embankment). This will push unnatural amounts of water directly into panther habitat, including the Panther Conservation Bank. Water naturally flowed south into the Kissimmee Billie Strand, however, this plan has a dam (optimal culvert) that will stop the natural flow of water. With this embankment and optimal culvert in place, the same amount of water would have less than half the acreage to sheet flow over. It will be at water heights that have never been seen before killing the highlands and this entire pristine forest. Most concerning is that they are building this optimal culvert and giant embankment because they are not allowed to put polluted water on Tribal land.

Mr. Mike Elfenbein (Cypress Chapter Izaak Walton League) said WERP will create changes on the landscape in perpetuity. At the same time, the DOI and the NPS has proposed wilderness designations for 149,000 acres of the Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) the majority of which is within the footprint of the Western Everglades. The pythons along with the ~ 430 invasive species that call the Big Cypress home pose a significant problem, including vegetation like Melaleuca and Brazilian pepper. They are causing significant damage to the western everglades and BCNP. He is dismayed that the DOI and the NPS continue to pursue these designations knowing that the federal and state governments are already pouring maximum effort into managing invasive species in Florida with minimum return. The Tribes and the Gladesmen are saying that this wilderness designation interferes with the ability to properly manage the resource. He implored them to remove the wilderness designations from the table.

Mr. Matt DePaolis (Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation) stated Everglades restoration is important to his organization as all these systems are interconnected. It has been a little over a year since Sanibel was decimated by a hurricane. They are rebuilding their communities and their economy and that requires having clean water. If they had harmful algal blooms that were decimating their community following Hurricane Irma, it would be a completely different story today. They are not out woods yet and a red tide event would be absolutely devastating to them during this rebuilding process. He encouraged them to keep up the momentum.

Mr. Thomas Oates (Western Everglade Stakeholders Association) said there is some good in WERP with benefits to the Miccosukee Tribe and the Sand Point Triangle. However, the SFWMD and the USACE still haven't solved major stakeholder over the Northwest Feeder Basin, especially regarding the degradation of the preserve which would be caused by the unnatural quantities and lack of quality of the water. The SFWMD maintains that there's no contribution from the drainage off the Seminole Reservation. The only treatment feature that was in the proposal was removed and now the alternative is to treat in place. WERP is not feasible with the amount of public objection, and no one wants the dirty water. The SFWMD and USACE continue to plead for acceptance on the promise that the details will be worked out. There's no precedent for a project of this scale with the mantra "trust us, fund us, and we'll fix it later". They spent the prior day asking the Legislators from Florida to inquire why this plan lacks the sufficient details to deserve its funding. Assuming that this proposal is funded, the lack of the stakeholder equity in the plan will result in its failure and a waste of time, effort, and money.

Ms. Kelly Cox (Audubon Florida) had the privilege of meeting with many members of the Florida delegation the prior day and was thrilled to hear the support that they have for Everglades restoration going into WRDA 2024. She echoed the comments made earlier about the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP) and WERP. Audubon is supportive of WERP moving forward and recognizes there are some concerns that need to be worked out, but those things can be addressed through this process, in particular the water quality component. They want to ensure that through their partnerships with the state agencies they are addressing upstream nutrient concerns that are impacting Tribal lands downstream. Cleaning up these waters before they reach Tribal lands is important. They know that about 70% of nutrient pollution flows from the C-139 basin and WERP will allow them to address this. The SFWMD is proposing an alternative to the Wingate Mill, and they are excited to see this moving forward. Audubon thinks WERP holds a lot of promise and it's been a long-awaited restoration effort. Audubon was a contractor from 2005 until 2011 for the USACE collecting baseline ecological indicator data to inform WERP, especially around the L-28 interceptor canal. That monitoring was halted, and they encourage that monitoring to pick back up again.

Mr. Tom McVicar (West Feeder Basin landowners) is a professional engineer practicing water management engineering in south Florida for the last 40 years. He was on the Design Team for the CERP Yellow Book and has been involved ever since. He is trying to solve some of the engineering issues and maybe just interpret what's happening in the west feeder basin. The plan from their perspective is really about the L-28 interceptor canal. The south end of the canal where the water comes out is a disaster. They support any version of this plan that is going to resolve that, but the remainder of the interceptor canal is being transformed into a 5 ½ mile long linear detention area that will limit the inflow coming from the Seminole Reservation. There's 32,000 acres of private property that flows into that same West Feeder down to the L- 28 interceptor and that water will have to get moved out of the L-28 canal because it's not allowed to go into this linear detention area. The engineering parts are unlike anything else in any other CERP plan. The confrontation with the landowners is unlike anything else he has seen on any other projects that have come out of the Yellow Book. The SFWMD thinks they are close to having engineering solutions regarding what to do with the water that can no longer go down the L-28, but they will require civil projects on private pristine land. The only hope of getting any support from the landowners is to minimize those impacts. If surface water is going to be raised on any of the properties, then they must own it and the troubling part about the modeling thus far is that they are going to have to own a lot of land if they can't figure out the engineering. They are willing to work hard to get to WRDA 2024, but they have a long way to go to get there.

Ms. Sarah Barmyer (Deputy Vice President of Conservation Programs at the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA)) stated that restoration of the Western Everglades remains a huge priority for NPCA. Not only is BCPN an iconic and invaluable ecosystem on its own, but they also know that 40% of the water flowing downstream into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay is coming from that region. This is why WERP is so critical. They appreciate and respect the Tribal knowledge of the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes whose leadership have been rightfully outspoken and asking the agencies to advance Western Everglades quickly for the protection of the ecological and cultural resources. She shared a letter in support of the TSP Alternative Hybrid Natural Flow Revised from the NPCA and their partners in the conservation community such as the Everglades Foundation, Audubon of Florida, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, and Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation. These groups have been deeply involved in the planning of this project for years, including many rounds of modeling and

alternative development that led to this strong final plan. For WERP and all the other restoration projects to deliver on the success they have seen in recent years, ongoing high-level funding at the state and federal level is critical. NPCA knows the work being done in the Everglades is setting the national standard in terms of landscape scale conservation and using natural infrastructure to promote climate resiliency.

Commissioner Sarah Heard (Martin County) noted that Martin County is where the IRL-S component of CERP is located. They have had a seat at the table since the Yellow Book and assured the Task Force that they will remain enthusiastically at the table until Everglades restoration is completed. They are confident that the C-44 Reservoir will be tweaked and will be fully operational very soon. She reported that the C-44 STA is working beautifully, and the C23/24 projects are under design and under construction and C25/26 are also under design. She thanked the federal and state partners for their dedication to the IRL-S. She extended her appreciation to the USACE for being sensitive to the health of the IRL and the St. Lucie Estuary. They recognize that if the USACE had strictly adhered to the LORS protocols in 2023 that they would be in the same dismal shape they were in in 2013 and 2015 which was disastrous.

Mr. Curtis Osceola (Miccosukee Tribe) said it's not easy work and that it's very important and critical that we stay on mission and continue to help the Everglades and advocate for its restoration. He thanked the members of the Task Force for their service. He noted he was honored to try and fill the shoes of Mr. Gene Duncan who unfortunately passed away this last year. They keep him in their prayers and carry on his passion for Everglades restoration and protecting Mother Earth. He wished he were there to see the success they have had these last few years. He thinks Gene would be proud to see where they've come on WERP. He thanked the SFWMD and the USACE for their work to get this across the finish line.

Public Comment – Via ZOOM

Mr. Ben Olsen (resident) noted that the prior morning he saw a young panther 300 feet south of where the proposed closeable culvert will be in the Kissimmee Billie Strand. A few months ago, he saw a pregnant female panther and is concerned this group doesn't grasp the damage being proposed. It's not particularly easy to come across a panther, yet they are seeing more of them every year. Florida panthers travel through this footprint at least once in their lifetime to and from the Preserve and every year human encroachment pushes the corridor tighter. He has also seen hogs, turkey, and deer near the Gates Star Camp. This is their land, and the landowners are their protectors from poachers, invasive species, and government intrusion and destruction. This group spent 5 years with the Tribes behind closed doors, unbeknownst to the landowners to develop that specific plan. That plan was quickly modified to flood their properties with no clear plan on how to achieve it just to meet deadlines. This plan will flood 18 inches of water onto their land, killing everything, including endangered animals. He asked that they delay and come up with a legitimate plan. The USACE will not destroy privately owned land, flooding pristine lands they have maintained to restore land elsewhere. Rushing WERP through is a disgrace and Everglades destruction. He is a fifth generation Floridian, and his family have been property owners just shy of 75 years and they didn't find out about this plan until the USACE had already locked in plans with the Tribe. There was one in-person meeting pertaining to WERP for the landowners in the past 30 years. The landowners are being forced to fight this and vow to fight this through the public, the Congress, and the courts.

Mr. Mike Melton (Dade County resident) opposed the potential Wilderness Designation of Big Cypress. Big Cypress is beautiful, but it's broken, and the designation would make it practically irreparable. They have invasive species that need to be managed. They all need to take care of this natural resource and this designation would prevent or severely hamper that from happening. He urged they save Big Cypress and not proceed with this wilderness destination.

Ms. Betty Osceola (Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida) noted she is sitting at her family's camp in the Big Cypress Preserve Area. She hopes everyone has seen her social media posts standing in water up to her chest. She urged that the water in WCA 3A be addressed. She noted tree roots have been exposed about 3 feet because of the erosion from intentional flooding of those lands year after year. In essence, it is an effort to remove the Miccosukee Tribe from the use of their lands and trying to take their land by flooding them out. She said they are not going anywhere and they are still there today because of the tenacity of their ancestors. There is even a project named Sam Jones, that was her great-great grandfather. They are going to continue to advocate to save their homeland. Although the Tribe says they wholeheartedly support WERP, she does not. She respects the fact that COL Booth acknowledged there are a lot of unanswered questions. At this time, she cannot throw in her support, even though her Tribal leaders do, as she still has questions including how more water is going to be put into the preserve without addressing how it's going to continue to flow as nature intended. She does not want to see another 3A scenario in the Big Cypress Preserve. She doesn't appreciate the fact that some agency employees are insinuating that the Tribal elders are lying when they say the Everglades historically had an abundance of wildlife and tree islands weren't flooded year-round. The agencies say they welcome the Traditional Ecological Knowledge but when it is given, Tribal elders are called liars and are owed an apology.

Mr. Newton Cook (United Waterfowlers in Florida) has been involved for over 20 years and has watched a fantastic success story occur with the cooperation of all the agencies and the EAA farmers. Today they're putting abundant clean water at the Tamiami Trail that is ready to flow south, however, Interior blocks flows to about 7,000 CFS at the trail 9 months out of the year, if not all year, to protect the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow nesting. From Orlando to the Florida Keys, there is only one place where water flowing south is blocked, Tamiami Trail. That destroys the WCAs, as stated by Ms. Osceola. People in the WCAs are flooded and tree islands are gone. Right now, the USACE is killing Lake Okeechobee with 16 plus feet of water because they can't let the water go south because it is blocked at Tamiami Trail by DOI. The channelization of the Kissimmee River destroyed tens of thousands of acres. The thing that is destroying the Everglades now and leaving Everglades National Park too dry is not allowing the water to flow south. If the water is allowed to flow naturally south as it did historically for thousands of years, they would save billions of dollars.

Ms. Nyla Pipes (One Florida Foundation) appreciates the hard work that has occurred on all the components of IRL-South. Unfortunately, they have a lot of challenges ahead because of the high water in WCA 3A. They support the operation of those structures at the trail to be conditions based instead of calendar based. They share the concerns about the quantity and quality of water going into the Western Everglades with WERP. They have more questions than answers. Everglades restoration doesn't work if they don't have all the stakeholders at the table. That's what Everglades restoration was based upon from the beginning. Leaving the landowners out for so long has created some real issues. It is important to move forward with those parts of WERP that are needed but they need to make sure that everyone's needs are

met. WERP is not ready to go through this WRDA. Finally, LOSOM is a disaster for the Lake, it doesn't meet the minimum flows and levels (MFLs). It is alarming that other operational plans are being based upon LOSOM. Water supply isn't just for people or agriculture, it's also for the environment. If they are not meeting the MFLs for Lake Okeechobee, then how will they do so moving forward as water supply decreases with every new resident of Florida.

Mr. John Rosier (Everglades Coordinating Council) said they have been experiencing high-water levels for years. Over the last 10 years, they have had at least 6 high water events. He was not sure what finally pushed the deviation, but in the future, they need a condition-based system rather than calendar based. A few years ago, they put in emergency pumps and the area started to revive within weeks. This shows that they need to move the water south. His other concern with WERP is how long it took them to get to this point for WCA 3A. If WERP goes through, how long are they going to have to complain until they make changes. He is glad that they are finally looking at this in a serious manner and hopefully they will get it done. The Coordinating Council does not agree with the wilderness designation in the Big Cypress Preserve. They won't be able to take mechanical stuff in there to get rid of invasives.

Mr. Johnny Saban (graduate student) spent the last year talking to stakeholders and wanted to share some key takeaways, specifically to the wilderness designation in the Big Cypress Preserve. At this meeting he noticed the continuous emphasis on the growth of restoration project activities. This is wonderful, but American Naturalist Henry David Thoreau said 150 years ago that the wilderness has become irrelevant before it's become resolved. Proponents of adding new areas to the National Wilderness Preservation System speak to these designations to keep these areas in their current condition, preventing development and anything else that would alter their wilderness character. He asked how they could know structural changes already threatening the primeval wilderness character of the Big Cypress Preserve will be addressed through a formal designation when all the evidence speaks to the contrary. The principal cost of wilderness designation is the lost opportunity for economic activity. Looking at the social cost, he asked whether this is to be a wilderness for the birds or the rest of them. Environmental amnesia should not cloud the judgment of the same agencies who once boldly proclaimed that recreation isn't compatible with restoration. The uncertainty of these projects and their long-term impacts deserve better consideration going forward.

Mr. Tom Waters (resident) noted his family has a camp in Big Cypress and he loves what this group is doing to try to help Big Cypress and the Everglades. He is concerned with the plans to put that amount of water into Big Cypress with nowhere to go. There are minimal culverts to get the water south. Without elevating US 41 like what was done over on the east side to get the water into ENP, they will end up drowning the Big Cypress. Slides from the November 1st meeting showed 1.5 feet of water across the cypress domes. If the cypress domes are flooded, so is everything else. He is opposed to the wilderness designation and said it would be a death sentence to designate hundreds of thousands of acres and the pythons are going to proliferate.

Mr. Joseph Cabrera (sportsman) noted this was his first Task Force meeting. He is impressed with everyone's enthusiasm, and commended everyone for having the same vision and protecting the Everglades because it really is a magical place. He laughs when he hears wilderness designation for Big Cypress, because he can't think of any place in the world that is more wilderness already than Big Cypress. It should be designated as 'Send prayers as fast as possible designation' through the Park Service. The only motorized vehicle that could be brought in there is to protect life. They need vehicles and machinery in there to protect wildlife.

It's counterproductive to other measures going on by agencies removing pythons and invasive species. To close it off makes zero sense. There are camp owners that live there along with panthers and deer. Mr. Elfenbein caught one of the biggest pythons recorded across the road from the potentially wilderness designated area. He echoed Ms. Osceola's comments about making sure they are talking to the Tribe, he can't think of any stronger people in south Florida than the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians and they know the Everglades better than anybody.

Mr. Harry Pickering's club (Everglades Conservation Sportsman Club) was founded in 1950 and over the past 73 years they have seen drastic changes from federal regulation, which has taken their land away and removed entire classes of vehicles that can be operated in the reserve. Access has been severely restricted. They are opposed to the wilderness designation as it will be difficult for state and federal agencies to conduct the prescribed burning, invasive species removal, and invasive plant remediation. They don't trust what impact the wilderness destination areas will have on sportsmen and recreation and are against it.

Mr. Daniel Watson (resident) noted that the public commenters are experts and are in the Central Everglades, Western Everglades, and Big Cypress on a weekly basis and some even live out there. WCA 3 has been flooded because they can't send water south to protect the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. CERP has been sending water south from Lake Okeechobee and it bottlenecks just north of 41. He has lost support for WERP and the proposal to build an STA on 500-year-old cypress trees. High water due to WERP will destroy wildlife. The wilderness designation in Big Cypress will hinder invasive species removal and prescribed burns. None of this is restoring the Everglades. They will never be able to send the same amount of water south because there is not enough area. They will just be making the water twice as deep, and the animals suffer for it. He urged they pay attention to the stakeholders.

Mr. Richard Martinez (Florida Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers) said he appreciated the flexibility regarding water in the WCAs. He echoed comments about moving towards condition-based and away from calendar-based management. They need flexibility, especially when it comes to considerations for the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. The system was compartmentalized to the point where it's degraded Lake Okeechobee and the central Everglades. It shouldn't take people screaming for change to occur. He echoed concerns about WERP, water quality into Big Cypress, and about how upland habitat will be impacted by high water. They need to send water south down into Florida Bay. A wilderness designation would remove tools for fire management and invasive species efforts.

Ms. Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch (St. Lucie River advocate) noted that the following year is the 100-year anniversary of the St. Lucie Canal. It was built as the primary canal to drain Lake Okeechobee and it has done unmentionable damage to the St. Lucie River and estuary and the southern IRL. In 2016 she saw the toxic algae coming out of the St. Lucie inlet. She thanked everyone for the progress made since then. They are appreciative of things on the docket such as the C-23, C-24, C-25, and the continuation of C-44. She has full confidence that CERP will be built out and successful. She does worry about water quality. She recalled a conversation with the late COL Terry Rice who told her that if the water quality wasn't good enough, it would be very difficult for CERP to work. Although she knows that water quality is a state issue, when it comes to CERP, it must be a federal and state issue.

Mr. Dave Owens (visitor) said that he visited Big Cypress National Preserve 20 some years ago and has visited for several weeks almost every year since then. These conversations are

extremely important and he applauded everyone taking the time to address these concerns. He echoed the concerns of many over the wilderness designation. He has seen the unforeseen challenges those designations had with the Sipsey Wilderness designation within the Bankhead National Forest in Alabama where they are starting to have an influx of wild hogs. The wilderness designation has made it difficult for groups to address the issues that wild hogs cause and the designation become somewhat of a sanctuary for this invasive species. He sees that happening in the Big Cypress with *Melaleuca* and other invasive species.

Mr. Tom Note (Safari Club International – South Florida Chapter) has been involved in the Everglades for over 50 years in south Florida. This wilderness destination will end programs that volunteers participate in and will also remove the ability for them to remove invasive plants and animal. SCI is involved in the FWC youth hunt program where they teach children about firearm safety and about being in the wilderness. As part of that program, they ask FWC and the SFWMD for permission to go in and get rid of invasive species. They wouldn't be able to do this if these areas were designated wilderness. The Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow has disappeared from several of the areas they are holding water from moving south on a calendar basis due to USACE requirements by the Department of Interior. The only reason to stop the water is for water quality issues and pollution. He urged them to listen to Ms. Osceola.

Ms. Amanda Waters (resident) echoed the comments on the wilderness designation and the effect it will have on invasive species they are trying to keep at bay. WERP will be devastating for Big Cypress. She is an in-holder and owns property in the middle of Big Cypress. Her family has been there over a hundred years before there was even a preserve. She wants to protect her property and make sure her children and grandchildren can enjoy it and right now that's in jeopardy. She went to the November 1st meeting and saw the projected additional water. They can't take another foot of water, it will kill so many things. Last year they had a panther and a bear on her property, which is not normal, because they were trying to get away from the water and stay dry. They are being told this additional water will just be for a little while, but it's long enough to kill their trees and put their animals in danger. She is hopeful they can come up with a solution that'll be less devastating for the Everglades.

Mr. Gil Smart (Friends of the Everglades) thanked the USACE for all their work on LOSOM and the management of the lake this year. They are based in Stuart, Florida where they live in perpetual fear of discharges from Lake Okeechobee, algae from the lake, and what it's going to do to the St. Lucie Estuary. They appreciate the flexibility the USACE has shown this year and that LOSOM affords the USACE help to avoid those catastrophic results. There's been a lot of talk about single species management with the high water levels in the Everglades. They have questions about single industry management that gives the sugar industry almost perfect flood control and irrigation. While it's not the reason that water has stacked up in the central Everglades, it is certainly a contributing factor. The SFWMD estimated that 20% of the water in the WCAs came from the EAA. They are excited to see the progress made, but a lot of questions remain. They worry about the National Academy of Sciences report that came out last year regarding whether the STAs are going to be able to meet phosphorus reduction requirements. There's a need for additional treatment capacity in the EAA itself. They are talking about LOCAR and storage elsewhere other than south of the lake. Storage is needed around the lake but there's a need for additional treatment capacity in the EAA for the EAA reservoir itself to be effective. They would like policy makers to look at acquiring additional lands for additional water treatment. When it comes to LOCAR, they have questions about the

extremely rapid pace and cost of LOCAR. They question how WERP is going to meet water quality targets following the removal of one STA and urge significant caution at the federal level.

Ms. Estenoz thanked everyone who gave public comment adding that they are grateful for how articulate and passionate everyone was. She reminded everyone there is another public comment period that afternoon.

7. Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP)

Ms. Angie Dunn reminded everyone that the study objectives remain unchanged since 2016. The waiver package is under review to complete the study for consideration in WRDA 2024. The Wingate Mill STA feature was removed from the TSP, restoring more natural overland flows. Additional modeling and performance measures were completed for Alternative Hybrid Natural Flow (HNFR). There is ongoing engagement with stakeholders and partners. The HNFR Alternative honors the project objectives and constraints by redirecting water back to natural flow paths. They are reducing over drainage caused by man-made canals. They are removing levees that obstruct natural flow patterns (or adding structures across levees). They want that sheet flow pattern to be more natural and not be part of a fully managed system. They are also maintaining the flood water conveyance to avoid impacts to built infrastructure.

They are looking forward to getting this into WRDA 2024 so they can obtain additional funding for the preconstruction engineering and design phase to do the additional modeling that will provide those details all the stakeholders want to see. The USACE process through planning into construction can be lengthy. This is the feasibility phase which is focused on the feasibility of a project. Is there federal interest which they all agree there is and what is the feasibility of moving forward. Once they have the Chief's Report and it's authorized by Congress, they will be able to get the hydrologic information and get into the design of the different structures. They then will be able to answer questions and concerns from the stakeholders.

Ms. Jennifer Reynolds reported they are working through the language in the PIR which will be going out for public comment and review soon. She explained that the Integrated Implementation Plan includes Non-WERP and WERP Features. The SFWMD will continue to develop, design, and conduct nutrient source control activities within the Feeder Canal Basin as a Non-WERP action. The implementation plan will describe the timing of the source control activities, which are anticipated to generally occur in the Feeder Canal Basin. The desired outcome of the source control activities in the North Feeder sub-basin are a downward trend in the total phosphorus concentrations at project culvert 17a. The sequencing of construction of components that make up the western flow way are dependent on the success of the source control activities in the West Feeder sub-basin and an effective monitoring plan. They know they have some challenges with water quality and they're important to solve, not just for WERP.

They did a water quality feasibility study for the Western Basins back in 2009 discussing how to improve water quality in these basins that have all kinds of challenges. A 2015 Western Basin Feasibility Study provided information that fed into the WERP. This is not a new problem and they have had some of these conversations for over a decade with landowners and they've seen limited action from the state and federal agencies. The state is fully committed to its responsibilities associated with water quality. In all their conversations with landowners and the Tribes, everyone is committed to doing their part for water quality. But nobody wants to do somebody else's part for water quality, which is totally fair. The state is on the same page with the federal government who doesn't want to have anything to do with the state's responsibility

for water quality. They are delicately balancing how to implement all these WERP and non-WERP features. The SFWMD has been working in earnest with its state partners such as DEP and FDACS to work with landowners and identify funding for implementation.

Key takeaways:

- WERP intends to rehydrate Western Everglades habitats and natural areas primarily through ground water.
- Private lands in the western flow way will have increased hydration as the Kissimmee Billy Slough is restored.
- Outside the Kissimmee Billie Slough, drainage and surface water ponding on private lands will remain within the range of current conditions.
- Ground water levels of private lands in BCNP will increase. WERP intends to ensure those landowners continue to have access and functional use of their properties.
- There is no place in the WERP planning area where this plan increases water levels above the natural ecological ranges of the diverse mosaic habitat types present across the landscape.

Ms. Reynolds noted that she is incredibly encouraged about WERP because there are a lot more things that they agree on than disagree on. Ms. Dunn reviewed the upcoming public engagement schedule adding that they are committed to continued public engagement.

Task Force member discussion followed.

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

Mr. James Erskine provided a progress update on the priorities, activities, and accomplishments since the June 2023 Task Force meeting. The WG has created the Florida's Coral Reef Coordination Team, which serves as the principal advisory body to the WG/SCG for issues impacting Florida's Coral Reef, and the Invasive Species Advisory Body, which are the subject matter experts working to implement WRDA 2020. The WG and SCG conducted a brainstorming and refinement session on the goals and objectives for the coming year. Mr. Lawrence Glenn reported on the SCG activities highlighting the fact that science is driving what they're trying to do in ecosystem restoration. Having sound science is imperative. The SCG is there to support the TF and the WG in coordinating that high level, sound science to ensure they have it for the tough decision-making.

9. Independent Scientific Review Panel Memorandum of Agreement Extension Request

Ms. Gina Ralph said they will be renewing their contract with the National Academy of Sciences. They currently have a Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of the Army, represented by the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works), the U.S. Department of the Interior, represented by the Director of the Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives, and the State of Florida, represented by the Secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, for the purpose of establishing an Independent Scientific Review Panel, to be convened by a body such as the National Academy of Sciences for reviewing CERP progress, which expires November 17, 2025. A 4-year extension is requested and must be executed no later than November 17, 2024, for the next two CISRERP panels.

10. Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS)

Ms. Tabitha Elkington presented jointly with Ms. Mindy Parrott. The Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS) is a jointly developed document and the work is done in partnership between the federal government and state of Florida. An in-depth review of the 2023 IDS was provided and included highlights of the 2023 update, project, and operational planning schedule updates, RECOVER science, and status of the CERP Yellow Book components. The IDS is the roadmap for the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration (SFER) program, and it reflects an optimized schedule and sequencing strategy for planning, design, and construction that's based on engineering and science. The IDS also serves the purpose of being the Master Implementation and Sequencing Plan that's described in the original CERP. As of FY 22, combined state and federal investments in the SFER Program totaled nearly \$8.2 billion dollars with an additional \$1.6 billion invested in the Herbert Hoover Dike and \$2.4 billion invested in Restoration Strategies in the Everglades Construction Project.

11. REstoration COordination and VERification (RECOVER) Update

Ms. Phyllis Klarmann provided the update reminding everyone that there are 12 different entities represented on RECOVER. They are a multi-agency team of scientists, planners, and modelers who apply the best available science. They aim to be collaborative and consensus based. They use a set of tools called performance measures to compare project alternative plans as they're being designed to predict how these projects are going to affect hydrology throughout the system and ultimately the ecological indicators that they're monitoring. RECOVER gets into the project planning and implementation process to make sure that science is being applied at all stages through the CERP project lifecycle. Monitoring for CERP is system wide. While individual projects have their own monitoring plans, RECOVER is meant to have the system-wide view and assess how they work together to improve hydrology throughout the entire system. The RECOVER Monitoring and Assessment Plan (MAP) will soon be updated. A monitoring workshop was hosted by the SCG in July 2023 to inventory existing monitoring efforts, including monitoring for CERP and non-CERP projects, and they received over 590 individual entries. Workshop products are now available. It's critical for the MAP update to know what gaps may exist in their monitoring plan.

Support for monitoring has changed over time. From 2007 to 2011 there was an average of \$10.5 million per year that was dedicated towards monitoring under RECOVER's MAP. From 2012 to 2017 that number was reduced by almost half. This resulted in a reduction of sampling sites for many of their monitoring agreements. The last several years between 2018 and 2023 they had an average of \$5.5 million between the SFWMD and the USACE. The cost of monitoring compared to the cost of construction under CERP is less than 1% of the total cost of CERP. Monitoring is a critical part of Everglades restoration to ensure that the projects are meeting their stated objectives. The cost benefit is huge. They are estimating that the future budget needs will be closer to the \$10 million per year they had previously. As these projects come online, if things are not responding in a way they expected them to or want them to, there will be ways they can help address that.

The workshop brought scientists together to share information so they can coordinate and leverage CERP and non-CERP data across the greater program. Coordination is critical to make sure that all the great information that's being collected throughout the system is shared and translated to the people building these projects and to the water managers who operate

them. There is an opportunity for continued Task Force engagement in assessment of CERP by sharing information, filling monitoring gaps, and staff support and coordination.

Task Force member questions and discussion followed.

Public Comment - In-Person

Ms. Martha Guyas (Southeast Policy Director for the American Sport Fishing Association) commended all the work of this Task Force and the partners at the table that are committed to Everglades restoration. She appreciated the presentations on progress and ongoing projects as well as the thoughtful conversation from Task Force members, especially on WERP. She invited everyone to the Everglades reception at 4PM, a widely attended and open event. Reception sponsored by the American Sportfishing Association, Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, Cypress Chapter of The Izaak Walton League, Coastal Conservation Association Florida, National Marine Manufacturer's Assoc and Phillips & Jordan, Inc.

Mr. Jeff Dixon (resident) said the western basin is not broken, please don't fix it. They have more panthers, bear, and fur bearing animals than ever before. They have gopher tortoises, Indigo snakes, beautiful orchids, and all types of plant life. He encouraged everyone to come and see what it is they are fighting for. When the USACE and the SFWMD tell them the structures are going to be okay, everyone must understand that they live in these homes because they love this ecosystem. If they are flooded, they will have no reason to live there. The USACE and the SFWMD have been working on this project for over 20 years and there must be a major problem with this design, or it would already be done. The western basin is currently within the natural ecological range, so he does not understand why they are going to take a chance and put more water in an area that's already okay. If there weren't enough water in the western basins, how would they have 500-year-old cypress trees.

Mr. Ron Bergeron (Bergeron Everglades Foundation) said he has been involved in the Everglades for 50 years and as a young man was part of saving Big Cypress Preserve along with many other people including Gladesmen. As they go forward it is important to remember they are all in this together, the Miccosukees, the Seminoles, and the 10 million people that live here. He is disappointed that this has been going on for 30 years and these private property owners need to be respected as a part of the solution. They have the same goal of making sure the environment is protected. If they look at satellite images, every cypress pocket is surrounded by pine islands and oak heads. The Big Cypress Preserve has the only sustainable population of panthers left on the earth and 2,000 bears. They should move forward on backfilling the interceptor, backfilling the L-28, and building the North Feeder STA, but not the western arm which needs to be studied. He has spent his life trying to save the Everglades and is 100% for restoration but they need to have communication.

Mr. Marshall Jones (resident) said as they speak at this meeting, the tree Islands in the Everglades, specifically in 3B where he lives, is currently 27cm under water. They are expecting an average of 8 inches rainfall in south Florida, so that 27cm is going to be 40cm. It's critical to the wildlife (black bears, raccoons, deer, otters, and others) and mass mortality is imminent unless they get that water moving and out. He would like to know what the proposed operating schedule is for the S-151, S-152, as well as the Blue Shanty flowways and their effects on 3B's water levels, their nominal average staging levels and where the proposed flood mark will be because it's obviously going to go up. In the last couple of years his home has been nearly flooded out multiple times and this year was no exception. While they all agree

WERP is necessary, the proposed WERP is not agreeable to any of them. They do not want to see these management practices being implemented in WERP for the proposed 270 days because it will cause further mass die offs in this transitional zone where most of the wildlife feed, bed, and travel. He asked that they leave spoil mounds along the back fills of the L- 28 and other canals so that animal and plant colonies may maintain their diversity and their ability to thrive. He asked that they bypass the wilderness designation for the Big Cypress for now.

Ms. Ali Bergeron (Everglades Foundation) said that Everglades restoration is serious business and requires a huge amount of collaboration between all the agencies, the stakeholders, the Tribes, and the landowners. She echoed the concerns of the property owners who want to see a plan that addresses their concerns about the volume of water that will be introduced into this pristine area. They also want to make sure this water is not going to have an impact 10-15 years from now on the ecosystem and wildlife. It is important to answer these questions before authorization and funding. She recognizes they will be able to weigh in at different stages of this process but asked that their concerns be addressed now. They ask for meaningful engagement and for the agencies to speak to them and their consultants.

Ms. Heather Cleckler (WERP stakeholder) said stakeholder input has been provided and she distrusts this process because before today she had only met five people in this room, and this has been going on for 30 years. Ms. Powers said they have been working on WERP since 2016. Ms. Powers said that everybody needs to be at that table, but they were never invited to that table. WERP had an STA that was 4,000 acres and 3,400 acres of that STA was on her Wingate Mill Ranch. She found out about that STA a week before the public meeting last summer. She hoped they would listen because they can help. It was her hope that from here on out they'll all be at the table. There is no place in WERP that shows an increase in water levels above natural ecological ranges. The prior month as she worked her ranch, her horse was up to his belly in water. There's currently 8 inches of rain pouring down on her ranch. Their proposal of 2-3 feet of water on their land for 276 days out of the year will drown them. She urged them to come up with a different plan or they cannot send it into WRDA24.

Ms. Diamond Bergeron (Bergeron Everglades Foundation) said she is a Glades woman and a landowner. Every Task Force member that mentioned WERP in their introductions seems to be in support of moving WERP forward, but she didn't hear one person that mentioned WERP say they're in support of getting the project right for the benefit of the environment. On the presentation, it stated that private lands in the western Flow Way will have increased hydration as the Kissimmee Billie Slough is restored. They have two miles of the Kissimmee Billie Slough on their property, and she would argue that it is some of the most pristine land in the entirety of the Everglades. Some here have visited and she invited others to come see the 500-year-old Cypress trees with their own eyes. The west feeder basin portion of this project feels like an attempt to fix something that isn't broken. The introduction of foreign polluted water into this sacred environment has the potential to be irreversibly devastating. She questioned the statement that there's no place in the WERP planning area where this plan increases water levels above the natural ecological ranges of the diverse mosaic habitat types present across the landscape. Ms. Smith said that Mother Nature is showing us the way and she is right. The people who know this land, live on this land, the people who have been good stewards of this land for decades, have let Mother Nature tell them exactly what she needs. She doesn't need a science degree to be able to say that the high watermark on their 500-year-old cypress trees, the length of a wading birds' legs and the panthers that remain there to raise their young, are

showing them that they don't need more water. She is currently using a paddleboard to service most of her trail cameras on her land. Ms. Brown mentioned the importance of collaborating with stakeholders within the WERP footprint, naming every single one of them but failed to name the environment as a priority and the landowners who have been good stewards of this pristine environment, some for over a century. The Everglades should be treated as the number one stakeholder. They are not against WERP. Restoring Tribal land should be a priority. But the Bergeron Everglades Foundation cannot support the west feeder basin portion of this project. This table is big enough for all of them she hopes they can all work together to come up with a solution that is best for the environment.

Mr. Thomas Oates (Western Everglade Stakeholders Association) said he was encouraged by the SFWMD identifying issues and concerns with WERP. It's validating their concerns as stakeholders. These canals, the L- 28 interceptor was created with the sole purpose of draining and creating this Reservation. Ms. Powers says the Seminole Tribe wants more water, so give it to them. Their areas are adjacent to these canals, and they can borrow water from that canal. They have irrigation pumps that pump water out of the canal, and they have drainage pumps that drain off the Reservation. They can give them the water they want right now with no modifications necessary, but they don't want the water because it's dirty. They have been studying this for decades. The last extension was because of an ultimatum, and they still failed to solve these issues. Now at the eleventh hour they want more public engagement. The SFWMD won't use the existing S-12 structures because they say that that's not what was authorized. They are opened based on a calendar. When their concerns are addressed and the preservation of the ecosystem is the number one goal, he will support WERP.

Mr. Mike Elfenbein (Cypress Chapter Izaak Walton League) said it was a shame that the Chair was gone because he had some things he wanted to address to her so he is hopeful she will watch the video. The Chair tells them that they want to hear from the public but his personal experience in sending messages and asking for help hasn't resulted in that same answer. They have a room full of people and a line full of people screaming what he has been screaming for the last 3 years and still not one mentioned the wilderness designation. His concern is that they're not really listening. The reason that they are taking time off from work, their lives, away from their families, is because they want to be sure every Task Force member heard and understood what was important. He understands the value of making the Tribes whole, but they have the same responsibility to the landowners.

Public Comment – Via ZOOM

Mr. Ben Olsen (resident) said there are multiple solutions such as using the Miccosukee privately owned non-Tribal land east of the West Weir to make a small STA and combine it with some step downs to clean the water. They could make an STA out of the unused Seminole Orange Groves, track down the pollutants and stop them at the source, or they could put the plan on pause to determine if it's even feasible. Moving forward and figuring it out as they go isn't a solution. They can't take any more water on their land because the natural canals were destroyed through the 1940s to 1960s by previous generations of the USACE. Ms. Reynolds is disingenuous in saying that she has worked with the landowners on this for over a decade when those in the WERP footprint never heard from her until 2022 or until the informal landowners meeting in June when she said they would never approve of flooding in the tentative plan. Today, she said the tentative plan with 18 inches of water on the landowners is fine. He asked they stop moving forward and bring the landowners to the table. They will fight this plan and the

insistence of putting WERP into the 2024 WRDA despite legitimate concerns is a disgrace. He is not opposed to restoring the triangle or ensuring water in the preserves are clean, but it shouldn't be done at the expense of landowners. With regards to the Seminole and Miccosukee representatives' comments, he is ashamed by their statements. His family, the Schultz, have had a fantastic relationship with the Tribe for generations, particularly the Seminoles. There is a rush to stop damage elsewhere by destroying other land, which is the cultural and historical ancestral lands of his family and the families around him. The landowners have not been given good faith in making these plans and have no voting power unlike the Tribes.

Ms. Donna Jolly (landowner in the western Everglades) said the SFWMD has proposed implementing a project in the western Everglades for over 25 years. Prior presentations have included modifications to the West Weir Control Structure located downstream of the two canals on private land that are proposed to be filled. She asked why this plan was eliminated and the one now proposed will impact over 30,000 acres of private land. These lands are already inundated for months at a time. She currently has a dozen deer in her front yard because it's one of the only high spots in the area. Water coming onto these private lands from the north and west have not been addressed in the current plan. She asked how they could trust the models of the levels of inundation, the size of the area affected, and the quality of the water coming onto their land and not take this into account. In dry times these legal canals that are proposed to be filled have minimal to no flow and therefore the term over drainage is not accurate. The private landowners recognize there are projects that can be constructed benefiting all in the region including the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes. Options include a new canal diverting flow from the Lard Canal to the east and ultimately into a proposed STA, maintenance dredging of canals to help remove sediments, and construction of water control structures and/or degradation of levee along the West Feeder Canal.

Ms. Michelle Arquette Palermo (Conservancy of Southwest Florida) on behalf of the Conservancy and the 6,500 members who support their mission expressed strong support of WERP, an important component of CERP. They appreciate all the work on the plan that will restore the hydrology in the western Everglades, address poor water quality, and reduce the severity and frequency of wildfires. She looks forward to reviewing the final plan, particularly as it relates to water quality, an essential component of overall ecosystem health. They look forward to continuing their work together as they pursue their shared goals for the restoration of America's Everglades.

Mr. Joseph Cabrera (resident) said he was excited to participate in his first Task Force meeting and hear the passion and love for the Everglades. He is a police officer and patrols just south of the Bergeron's Ranch on US 27 for the past 13 years. In one of the newest USACE videos of the Picayune Strand showcasing the giant pump stations, there's a gator swimming in 5 feet of water next to a pine tree. Just because a plan seems good, things can change as time goes by. One of the most important things in leadership is admitting that the plan is wrong. He urged they consider the stakeholders and let Mother Nature take its course.

Ms. Betty Osceola (resident) said she was glad that everybody now feels how she feels. Their lands are being used as de facto STAs. The solution is not to create more STAs on Tribal lands when they're already doing that by flooding them unnecessarily. They had a flooding issue recently and she applauds the SFWMD for wanting to open those gates west of the 12A and B, which would have helped them, but they're constrained. They can't even operate the gates they have in place that would have helped their flooding issues. They put pumps to put water out of

3A into the preserve which has destroyed a lot of the hardwood hammocks. One of her main concerns with WERP is how they are going to get that water out. The Tribal members are frustrated and technically, no one was ever supposed to settle in any area south of Ocala because it was passed by Congress to end the wars. Unfortunately, when they executed this process for this plan, they excluded a lot of people. She asked they move forward together to address these concerns rather than pitting the public against the Tribes. This is going to create animosity and that does not help the environment. The gates are currently closed, and it's been raining buckets all day long. They cannot let the water flow because of this bureaucracy and she urged they work together for the environment.

Mr. John Rosier (resident) noted that 15 years ago when CEPP was first started they were invited to be board members. It was a new idea on how to get stakeholders involved at the very beginning. They were able to work through stuff and in the end, the CEPP document was something that the sportsman and Gladesman signed off on because they were engaged from the very beginning. He feels sorry for the landowners who just found out about something they have been working on for 20 years. He encouraged they go back to these types of meeting formats where the stakeholders are at the table and compromise and find that middle ground.

Mr. Newton Cook (United Waterfowlers in Florida) noted these meetings are attended by very knowledgeable people from the agencies and the public. He was originally a supporter of WERP, but he is not any longer. What projects have been talked about that are going to do something about 50 years of accumulation of muck at the bottom of Lake Okeechobee? Every time there's a little bit of a wind, it's stirred up into a colloidal suspension in the water. In the warm season, they get algae blooms flowing east, west, and south. They have a problem moving lake water. They are currently going to get up to 5 inches of rain and the lake is at 16 feet. The lake has no submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) to clean the water. After 15 feet the SAV starts dying. The other day they talked about some projects north of the lake, a giant reservoir, which no one north of the lake wants built. He asked what they were doing in Everglades restoration to help the ecology of Lake Okeechobee, the heart of the Everglades.

Ms. Jessica Pinsky (Captains for Clean Water) gave a special welcome to the new Task Force appointees. She is a seventh generation Floridian, whose family includes a former United States Senator and Governor, one who was involved in ditching and draining of the Everglades. Captains for Clean Water was founded due to a water quality crisis that was causing immense damage to the northern estuaries. A solution to that crisis, Everglades restoration, existed but the political will to move it forward was not there. With the help of partner organizations, guides, anglers, supporters, and outdoor industry brands, they set out to change that and they have made progress. They are more vigilant now than ever to threats to progress on Everglades restoration and clean water. As their community and businesses continue to rebuild, the economy will need clean healthy estuaries and a restored Everglades more than ever. She thanked the COL and the USACE for outlining and sharing the three-pronged approach for alleviating flooding in the WCAs and the work they have done to achieve a lake operation schedule that's more balanced and reduces damaging discharges. Both situations benefit from completing restoration projects as quickly as possible. She congratulated the SFWMD, the Department of Interior, and Florida DEP for nearing the finish line for LOSOM, they have broken ground on several CERP projects, including the EAA Reservoir. She encouraged them to continue this momentum by expeditiously authorizing funding and completing these projects that will provide relief to the northern estuaries and send water south to Florida Bay.

Ms. Amanda Waters (resident) asked that they take some time to consider this and put on the brakes while they consider what this can do to their environment, maybe 2024 isn't the year to get this approved. Once that land is destroyed it's destroyed forever.

Ms. Adele Smith's (landowner) family owns a 2,500-acre ranch in this project and the Lard Can Canal runs through the center of her property. It wasn't until 9 or 11 months ago that they heard they were going to fill in that canal and flood their land. They were very upset and continue to be concerned. This land is pristine and full of panthers, deer, wild turkeys, live oak trees, cypress trees, bears, and other wildlife. They can't live underwater. They have great concerns about water quality. The quality of the water in the Lard Can Canal has not been tested in 20 years so the data they have is outdated. If things don't work out as planned, it's too late to go back and change it. She is concerned for Ron Bergeron because that water is going to flow right down to him. It is her hope that they come up with some other project and give them the chance to continue living on their land and produce the cattle needed for people to survive.

Mr. Ramon Iglesias (resident) said Mr. Newton Cook has a wealth of knowledge, and he continues to talk about the health of Lake Okeechobee which is the liquid heart of the Everglades. All through the LOSOM process they have focused on the east, west, and south, and how it's beneficial with LOSOM to benefit those areas. Lake Okeechobee is in bad shape and in two years Lake Okeechobee will no longer be a world-class fishery. They have less than 2,500 acres of vegetation. Herbert Hoover Dike restoration finished 3 years ahead of schedule and under budget. He asked that they take that money and divert it into projects on the lake. Every meeting that he attends, he is hearing that the lake needs 100,000 acres of submerged vegetation for habitat and filter. The lake needs to be at 12 ½ to 15 ½ of water, yet LOSOM throws that elevation out the window. They are down to 2,500 acres of SAV on a lake that currently sits at 15.97 feet. This is an El Niño year and they are going to have high water through the winter. Six months from now the conversations are going to be that they have zero vegetation, zero habitat, and 2 years from now they will no longer have a fishery on the second largest freshwater lake in the country that is not man-made.

Mr. Jim Alderman (resident) said first they were told they want to cover the Lard Can Canal and the Wingate Mill Canal because of water quality. They go and take their own water samples and find out the water is as clean as rainwater. Then they hear that it's not water quality, it's water quantity, so in their meeting with Ms. Reynolds, they suggested they go east and hook up 2 miles of canal to the STA that will be built on the Garcia property and that would solve all the problems. No more water would go to the Tribe. He is not sure if anyone takes notes when the public comments but after going to several of these meetings, it's just the same thing every time and it's frustrating to take a half a day off and listen to what's going on only to find out its mostly government wanting to spend more money. They are not using sound science or monitoring. Those canals have not been monitored for phosphate levels since 1997. He has been farming for 50 years and water doesn't sheetflow, it's going to pond up. The modelling says they're going to be underwater for 270 days out of the year and he asked how the deer, panthers, hogs, turkeys, rabbits, and quail are going to survive. He, along with his brother, own the Florida Panther Conservation Mitigation Bank. They spend a lot of time and money making that the most pristine piece of property in South Florida. They eradicate the Melaleuca and keep their property clean better than the SFWMD and Tribe does. They have a trust fund that's going to take care of it forever. He hopes someone comes to the senses and looks at the alternatives.

Next Steps and Closing Comments

Secretary Hamilton thanked everyone for investing time into some very important subjects and noted the importance and the weight of their public comments. He thanked everyone for presenting and for the amazing work they do. They continue to have a unique opportunity to put their fingerprints on one of the most important environmental restoration projects in the world. They should not shy away from the opportunity to bring everybody forward to a point of understanding. They look for opportunities to make sure they are hitting the mark because they all must move forward together. He stressed the importance of making sure they address those individual concerns and answer questions in a way that provides confidence to move forward.

Mr. Gelber asked that Task Force members with specific items for the WG and SCG, to work with their representatives on the WG and SCG to help the chairs develop the agendas for the upcoming year. WG and SCG charter amendments will be provided at an upcoming meeting. As for RECOVER, they will continue to work on the comments heard today.

Task Force members provided some closing comments.

Meeting adjourned.

Handouts:

1. Agenda
2. Membership Roster
3. Meeting summary, June 1, 2023
4. OERI Update
 - a. Presentation
 - b. Priority Invasive Species Recommendations
 - c. Task Force Charter
 - d. 2024 Meeting Calendar
5. USACE Program and Project Update
6. SFWMD Program and Project Update
7. Integrated Delivery Schedule
 - a. 2023 IDS Placemat
 - b. Presentation
8. WERP presentation
9. RECOVER Presentation
10. WG and SCG Presentation
11. Independent Scientific Review Panel MOA Extension Request Presentation