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June 28, 2016

Jacksonville District Operations Division Chief Jim Jeffords
United States Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Blvd.
Jacksonville, FL 32207-8175

Dear Chief Jeffords,

As you are aware, 2016 has been one of the wettest years on record in Florida. The impact of this unprecedented volume of rain and the resultant ongoing discharges from Lake Okeechobee and the local basins has been devastating to our communities located on the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. Toxic blue green algae blooms are clogging our rivers, beaches are being closed and the Florida Department of Health is warning people to avoid contact with the water as a precaution.

The State of Florida has taken significant steps to address the releases from Lake Okeechobee within the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan expending over $2 billion since its inception and this past year passing the Legacy Florida Act which will require that 25% of Amendment 1 money or at least $200,000,000 per year be allocated to restoring the Everglades year over year. Most importantly under Legacy Florida, priority must be given to those projects which will stop the releases from Lake Okeechobee. Although these critical projects will provide long term solutions to the problems created by the releases from Lake Okeechobee, we are currently facing an immediate crisis in our estuaries.

As we await the completion of these critical long term projects, citizens are demanding near-term solutions to stop the discharges. We are in complete accord with our constituents which is why we are strongly urging the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to come up with immediate actions that can be taken **now** to address our problems. While we recognize the responsibility to protect the lives of people living near the Lake Okeechobee system, we strongly urge the Corps to also seek solutions to the immediate environmental, economic and potential health crisis facing the people of our communities who being devastated by the releases from Lake Okeechobee.

One of the most impactful ways to bring immediate relief to our communities is to revisit the current Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS). Since it was last changed in 2008, the people living in the immediate vicinity of Lake Okeechobee have benefitted from tens of millions of dollars in upgrades to strengthen the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike. Such enhancements should allow for Lake Okeechobee to store more water during wet periods and could help to reduce the need for discharges to occur.

Understanding that a revision of the LORS schedule may take some time, we would urge an immediate, temporary halting of the releases from Lake Okeechobee for a limited amount of time to allow our estuaries to "flush" with the natural flow of salt water that normally occurs when there are no releases. This would enable the restoration of natural saline levels in many of the areas impacted by blue green-algae and terminate its growth.

Additionally, the Army Corps should consider reviewing the current protocol governing Lake Istokpoga & the Upper Chain of Lakes to determine how their inflows could be better timed to relieve discharge pressures on Lake Okeechobee. In short, we urge that more water be held back longer without adverse effect on public safety. Whatever economic impacts that might

be created in the Upper Chain of Lakes must be measured against the severe economic impacts currently found in the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries. While the U.S. Army Corps is primarily focused on public safety, it must play an important role in the state and federal government's ongoing restoration efforts by providing clarity on the regulation schedule for these northern water bodies.

Finally, another critical component to solving these challenges is ensuring that large flows can pass through the Water Conservation Areas into Shark River Slough in ENP and then out to the Gulf. This was the basis of the original design and construction of the S-12 structures on Tamiami Trail. When they were first approved by the Corps and Congress, the S-12s were expected to be able to release as much as 30,000 cfs from Water Conservation Area 3-A into Everglades National Park. As constructed they have never been able to release more than 7,500 cfs, even during the most extreme high water events.

In February, after the wettest month of South Florida's dry season since records began, the S-12s were further limited by endangered species act restrictions that kept two of the four S-12 structures closed. One consequence of the inadequate capacity is the stacking up of water north of Tamiami Trail, causing serious damage to the habitat. The free flowing waterway through Shark River Slough to the Gulf of Mexico that the original Water Management Plan envisioned is not functional. This is an unnatural set of circumstances and exacerbates the harm to the wildlife of the greater Everglades, such as the panther, alligator, wood stork and the tens of thousands of other wading birds who live and nest in the area.

As our state continues to deal with the massive amount of rainfall that has fallen across the Lake Okeechobee system, we appreciate the hard work of the men and women at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their commitment to public safety. But equally important is the economic well-being of our citizens, and for many, the ongoing discharges have taken their toll on local businesses.

We look forward to discussing the possible actions that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can take to reduce the frequency of these discharges and limit the unwelcome impact they are having on our communities as soon as possible. Our contact information is provided above.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this extremely important matter.

Gayle Harrell

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Joseph A. Negron, Jr.

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