

Approved Minutes  
 Working Group (WG) and Science Coordination Group (SCG) Meeting  
 SFWMD, West Palm Beach, FL  
 February 25, 2020

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

James Erskine called the meeting to order at 10:02AM and recognized Greg Langowski from Senator Marco Rubio’s office, Commissioner Karson Turner, and Task Force member Gene Duncan who were present. He welcomed new SCG member, Lawrence Glenn, representing the SFWMD. SCG members were reminded that anyone interested in serving as SCG Vice Chair to please contact Adam Gelber. Nick Aumen and Bob Johnson had schedule conflicts, so Adam Gelber helped chair the meeting. The next Task Force meeting is planned for May 7<sup>th</sup> at the Long Key Natural Area in Davie and will be chaired by Dr. Tim Petty, Assistant Secretary for Water and Science. The Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI) is working to update the public participation document created in 1996 as well as the Cross-Cut Budget and Biennial Report. Members were reminded that the meeting was being webcast and that the next Joint WG and SCG meeting was planned for June 23<sup>rd</sup>. Members were asked to introduce themselves and provide brief introductory remarks.

**In Attendance:**

**Working Group (WG) Members**

|   |   |                |
|---|---|----------------|
| James Erskine – Chair – FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Comm. | √ |                |
| Nick Aumen – Vice Chair – U.S. Geological Survey                | - |                |
| Stephania Bolden – NOAA, Florida Keys Nat’l Marine Sanctuary    | - | Nancy Diersing |
| Amy Castaneda – Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida          | √ |                |
| Kevin M. Cunniff – Seminole Tribe of Florida                    | √ |                |
| Deb Drum – Palm Beach County                                    | √ |                |
| Rebecca Elliott – FL Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services | √ |                |
| Cecelia Harper – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency           | √ |                |
| Veronica Harrell-James – U.S. Attorney’s Office                 | - |                |
| Lee Hefty – Miami Dade County                                   | √ |                |
| COL Andrew Kelly – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers                 | √ |                |
| Marjorie Kirby – FL Dept. of Transportation                     | √ |                |
| Jennifer Leeds – South Florida Water Management District        | √ |                |
| John Maehl – Martin County Board of County Commissioners        | √ |                |
| Roland Ottolini – Lee County Division of Natural Resources      | √ |                |
| Pedro Ramos – NPS, ENP & Dry Tortugas National Parks            | √ |                |
| Leonard Rawlings – Bureau of Indian Affairs                     | - |                |
| Edward Smith – Florida Department of Environmental Protection   | √ |                |
| Sunny Snider – NOAA, Southeast Fisheries Science Center         | - |                |
| Joe Sullivan – U.S. Department of Transportation, FHWA          | - |                |
| Larry Williams – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service                 | - |                |
| Vacant – U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, NRCS                        | - |                |
| Phil Everingham – Chair, BBRRCT, Special Advisory Group         | - |                |
| Adam Gelber – Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives      | √ |                |

**Science Coordination Group (SCG) Members**

|  |   |             |
|--|---|-------------|
| Bob Johnson – Vice Chair - Everglades National Park                | √ |             |
| John Baldwin – Florida Atlantic University                         | - |             |
| Joan Browder – NOAA, National Marine Fisheries Service             | √ |             |
| Amy Castaneda – Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida             | √ |             |
| Angela Dunn – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers                         | √ |             |
| James Evans – City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department         | √ |             |
| Lawrence Glenn – South Florida Water Management District           | √ |             |
| Jennifer Hecker – Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership | √ |             |
| Chris Kelble – NOAA, AOML  | - | Ian Zink    |
| Chad Kennedy – FL Dept. of Environmental Protection                | √ |             |
| Gil McRae – FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission           | - | Brad Furman |
| Stacy Myers – Seminole Tribe of Florida                            | √ |             |
| Bob Progulske – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service                     | √ |             |
| Stephanie Romañach – United States Geological Survey               | - |             |
| Dan Scheidt – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency                 | - |             |
| Jason Strenth – U.S. Department of Agriculture – NRCS              | - |             |
| David Rudnick, Special Advisor – National Park Service             | √ |             |
| Vacant – FL Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services        | - |             |
| Vacant – U.S. Department of Agriculture – ARS                      | - |             |

**2. Task Force’s Top 5 Action Items**

Adam Gelber reminded the members of the brainstorming session held at the December 2019 Joint WG and SCG meeting to develop a list of Task Force actionable items. The results of that session are being brought before the group for further refinement. Allyn Childress noted the list of items developed at the December meeting were categorized into process, science/technical, and policy/funding suggestions to help guide this discussion. The results from this meeting will be presented to the Task Force at their May meeting. The goal is to utilize the Task Force’s problem-solving capacities to develop a list of action items. Possible action items identified by the group included:

- Consideration of cultural resources as water is moved through the system. Show the linkage with cultural resources and sea level rise with the loss of wetlands in the southern part of the system since many cultural resource sites are located along the coastline. Part of the National Park Service (NPS) mission is protect those cultural resources and consultation takes place with both tribes to ensure those cultural resources are protected as they make changes to the landscape.
- Managing constraints to getting the water south. Seepage management is the most critical item for Everglades National Park (ENP). It is key to project linkages. Constraints (water quality and seepage management) need to be managed.
- Recognize that sea level rise is tied to a lot of projects and is accelerating. Important to hydrate wetlands and minimize saltwater intrusion. They need to move quickly with project implementation and funding to be consistent with the sea level rise. NOAA’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science is working on modelling exercises on the southwest coast with local partners and will make a presentation to this group.

- Threatened and Endangered species are a critical issue with restoration resulting in enhanced habitat conditions.
- There is a need for a full, functional toolbox to deal with invasive exotic species including the use of herbicides especially at the local government level. FWS signed a glyphosate letter of support for FWC to make sure they maintain their ability to use glyphosate in treatment of aquatic plants. FWC is undertaking the Lake Okeechobee Fish, Wildlife, and Habitat Management Plan that will address many of these issues.
- Local governments represented on the WG and SCG have some connection to the overall CERP and can work with this group on critical issues such as seepage management and threatened and endangered species. There was a request to reach local governments in a meaningful way.
- Importance of RECOVER funding being restored.

The OERI will continue refining this list with the chairs in preparation for the May Task Force meeting and follow-up at future WG/SCG meetings.

### **3. Tamiami Trail Next Steps (TTNS), Phase 2 Update**

Bob Johnson called into the meeting to provide his update on behalf of the Interagency Team working on the TTNS project. The project was initially designed in parallel with the Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP) with the goal of sending more water south to reduce harmful discharges to the northern estuaries and restore flows to the central and southern Everglades. This will require the raising of the remaining 6.5 miles of roadway to accommodate a design high water of 9.7 feet. The proposed roadway will be raised from 10 to 13.1 feet and will be shifted southward to accommodate a new access lane and expanded diagonal parking at the Tiger Tail Camp and a westbound turning lane at Gator Park. An improved swale system will be built to the south for water retention and water quality improvements. Work will have to be done around Gator Park and Coopertown to restore their parking and the same will have to be done at the Osceola Camp. The design and construction phase has been streamlined allowing for project construction to start in 2020 rather than 2021. Pedro Ramos added that he has met with the Osceola and Tiger Tail camps, the Miccosukee Tribe, and others and FDOT is being attentive to the concerns raised by the airboat operators and the Tribe with respect to their access. They are looking at a series of options for the Osceola and Tiger Tail camps to address concerns recently raised by the Miccosukee Tribe.

### **4. SFWMD Program and Project Update**

Megan Jacoby reviewed the status of some of the projects the SFWMD is working on with the USACE to include the C-44 Reservoir and STA; C-43 Reservoir; CEPP; CEPP Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) STA; and Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands (BBCW). The Biscayne Bay Southeastern Everglades Restoration (BBSEER) project will include BBCW Phase 2 and the C-111 Spreader Canal eastern project and the team is drafting the Project Management Plan. State programs including performance of the STAs and the Restoration Strategies were reviewed. The SFWMD is in the preliminary stages of starting the South Dade Curtain Wall project. Seepage management is an important part of Everglades restoration especially in the southern Everglades. The goal is to use some impervious material to keep the water in the natural system. CEPP recommended a curtain wall to manage seepage from increased stages in ENP. The SFWMD South Dade Initiative recommended a curtain wall as a long-term solution and a curtain wall was also proposed as a stand-alone, flood control feature. The SFWMD is still collecting

data and is planning a series of meetings to hear ideas and concerns. Two public workshops are planned for the March – September 2020 timeframe. Jennifer Leeds added that part of the public engagement is to roll out the study objectives and challenges. There will be some initial information since some of the work has been done but much of the work is yet to be undertaken.

Lee Hefty, on the seepage wall concept, said it was important to have water for restoration of the natural system and the challenge will be in making sure that whatever they do does not become problematic. Important not to compromise water quality and the aquifer given sea level rise. James Erskine noted the importance of using the same terminology (seepage wall, curtain wall, seepage management) as they move forward.

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

Howie Gonzales reviewed the FY20 budget which totals \$235 million for construction and \$13.821 million for O&M. The FY21 President's budget includes \$250 million for construction and \$10.052 million for O&M. The details of where the \$250 million will be allocated is tied to the justification sheet produced by the OMB which has not yet been released for any of the big programs nationwide. The 2020 Report to Congress kick-off meeting was held to assess what needs to be updated and begin writing the report due in December 2020. A series of 2020 engagements were reviewed that included two ribbon cutting ceremonies, two signing ceremonies, and a December groundbreaking on CEPP South. Updates were provided on projects within the SFER program including the C&SF: Canal 111 (C-111) South Dade, Modified Water Deliveries to Everglades National Park, and CEPP. The PIRs for the Loxahatchee River Watershed Restoration Project (LRWRP) and the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP) are in the final stages of development and on track for WRDA 2020 consideration. The USACE briefed the Task Force of its intent to terminate the Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) at its October 2019 meeting. Since then they have received letters of study support from the SFWMD, FDEP, DOI, NPS, and the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes. They are re-initiating the study effort including preparation of a 2<sup>nd</sup> SMART Planning waiver request. The BBSEER study effort is fully funded and will kick-off in July. The USACE has been asked to consider looking at the C&SF project in the context of flood risk management and sea-level rise resiliency. The initial ask was that they tie it to the South Atlantic Comprehensive Coastal Study but that did not get any traction, so they are working through their traditional process to pursue a new study start as a flood risk management study not an aquatic ecosystem restoration study. They will partner with the SFWMD on this new feasibility study and look at everything associated with flood risk management in the C&SF project.

## **6. Lake Okeechobee Operations and Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM)**

COL Kelly said the lowering of Lake Okeechobee the prior year was successful and there were many positive indicators and they did not see significant water shortage issues. He reviewed the LOSOM objectives that include managing risk to public health safety, life and property, continuing to meet authorized purposes for navigation, recreation and flood control, improving water supply performance, and enhancing the ecology in Lake Okeechobee, the northern estuaries, and across the south Florida system. Formulation will be completed in the summer and they will work through the array of alternatives in 2021. Completion is planned for 2022 in concert with the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike.

Deb Drum thanked the COL for taking the time to listen to the issues associated with the LRWRP and appreciates the challenges the USACE has in making these difficult decisions. Palm Beach County has several concerns with the LOSOM process including the interpretation of the Savings Clause. Comments were solicited on the EAA South Reservoir and STA and Palm Beach County sent a letter to the team that articulates the lack of consistency the USACE has had in interpreting discretion when making operational decisions. She asked that they collaborate more to understand how these decisions are made.

Jennifer Hecker expressed support for the USACE exercising discretion. She has seen positive responses in the Caloosahatchee River with expanding submerged aquatic vegetation. Her organization is spending millions of dollars on aquatic vegetation restoration which could be at risk without what the USACE is doing.

### **Public Comment**

Ms. Irela Bague (Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce) thanked the USACE, SFWMD, and Miami Dade County for the incredible progress they have made on the completion of BBCW Phase 1. She is encouraged by the planning for the BBCW Phase 2 and the C-111 SC projects which have been combined and renamed BBSEER. On behalf of the Economics Resilience Group of the Climate Compact, she also thanked the Corps for the new flood risk management study of the C&SF system.

Ms. Caroline McLaughlin (Vice Chair, BBRRCT) thanked everyone who has helped advance the BBCW project, the only CERP project with direct benefits to Biscayne National Park and important to Miami Dade County and the southeastern portion of the Everglades ecosystem. With this year's historic Everglades funding levels, the Corps now has full funding to complete this phase in just a few years. They understand the bulk of the benefits will come from the construction and operation of what was once known as BBCW Phase 2 and they are excited to proceed with planning of the re-branded BBSEER project. Happy to continue using the BBRRCT as a forum for public engagement on this important project. In her capacity working with the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), she thanked Bob Johnson for his Tamiami Trail project update adding that completion of this project will be a tremendous victory for Everglades restoration. Regarding seepage management, she said that it was helpful to hear the detailed timeframe for moving forward and NPCA is interested in hearing what the potential impacts to the Biscayne aquifer may be. Finally, on the draft EIS for the Combined Operations Plan (COP), NPCA has been actively involved in the COP planning process since scoping began in 2017 and has been advocating for the restoration of ENP and Florida Bay for decades. The final operations plan will determine where, when, and how much water flows south into Florida Bay from infrastructure projects that have taken \$1 billion in taxpayer dollars and decades to construct. How they use these projects is as important as the construction itself. Last week there were three public meetings on the draft plan and they want to thank the Corps for holding an additional meeting in the Keys. The Keys community will be directly impacted by the results of this plan. Unfortunately, these benefits will be delivered in the rainy season and the plan fails to increase freshwater flows during times of low water availability leaving Florida Bay susceptible to severe drought. NPCA urges the agencies to adjust the operations plan and finalize a COP that delivers true restoration benefits to the Everglades

Drew Martin (Loxahatchee Group of the Sierra Club) noted they have provided written comments to the USACE. He is concerned with bird nesting and there not being enough water. Also concerned about Florida Bay now that they are looking at moving into another dry period and another seagrass die-off and algal blooms. This shows the importance of the work being done here. The Loxahatchee Group is

also concerned about LOSOM. The COL and USACE have done the best job that can be done under difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, people react to the emergency, but the reality is that Palm Beach County, Martin County, and St. Lucie County were suffering tremendously from these discharges. The gamble taken to reduce these discharges has resulted in water quality improvement and people need to appreciate that. They discharged too much water not because of the USACE but because of development. They have also put commercial interest before the environment when it comes to how they use their water. The term “savings clause” is a misnomer, it is not about saving water, it is about using water. Ultimately, they need to start conserving and managing water properly.

## **7. Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS) Alternative Scenario**

Allyn Childress noted that the Task Force discussed having alternative scenarios for the IDS. The WG/SCG conducted a workshop in December and discussed potential funding scenarios. The discussion at this meeting will help further refine the concept so that a final product can be presented to the Task Force at its May meeting. They will not revamp or change the prioritization in the current IDS. The alternative scenarios would include current and pending construction. The goal is to have a product that would easily convey overall funding to decision-makers that could also include sea-level rise and invasive exotic species. Since the December meeting, OERI has worked with USACE, FDEP, and the SFWMD to refine these concepts and developed some proposed scenarios. The proposed message will:

- Build on historic momentum
- State the current funding is headed in the right direction
- Remind them that intense construction years ahead will require additional and significant investment
- State that they need to stay on track with funding otherwise restoration will take longer and cost more
- Highlight the return on investment: a healthy and resilient Everglades directly supports our economy and sustainability.

James Erskine added that they have a couple of “heavy years” in the order of \$800 million and not meeting some of the marks would stretch out the timeline. Ed Smith said it was important to put it in perspective, what they are asking for is not unprecedented and they have done it before, it can be done again.

## **8. Invasive Exotic Species**

Carrie Beeler provided a presentation reminding the members that they were directed by the Task Force to make invasive exotic species one of their priorities. The Strategic Action Framework document was developed in 2015 and the goal is to update this document in 2020. They will identify successes and highlight progress made in five major areas: research; tool development; management actions; capacity building; and coordination. Allyn Childress asked members to prioritize what they will tackle first. During the 2015 prioritization exercise, half of the priorities focused on Goal 2, eradication through early detection and rapid response. Because they tackled a lot of those priorities, the results of this prioritization exercise brought more focus to Goals 1, 3, and 4 (prevention, containment, and long-term management). OERI will continue to work with the multi-agency group to define the 2020 Framework priorities, develop the coordinated budget, and prepare for the May 2020 TF meeting.

### **Approval of the Meeting Minutes**

James Evans made a motion to approve the minutes from the December 2019 meeting which was seconded by Angela Dunn. Minutes were approved as presented.

### **9. System-wide Ecological Indicators – Interactive/Facilitated Session**

Laura Brandt conducted an interactive session using the Turning Point live polling software on the purpose and utility of the ecological indicators section of the Task Force’s Biennial Report. The intent was to determine how the current format and content is meeting their needs. Responses provided by the members were discussed. Overall, results indicated that while there is a high level of support for the current reporting there is room for improvement. Concerns were raised about the need for continued funding. The results from this interactive session will be used to improve the reporting in the Ecological Indicator section of the 2020 and 2022 Biennial Reports.

### **Public Comment**

None

### **Next Steps and Closing Comments**

James Erskine reminded folks of FWC’s Lake Okeechobee Fish, Wildlife and Habitat Management Plan public meeting the following day at the John Boy Auditorium in Clewiston. Adam thanked the SFWMD for hosting this meeting and everyone for participating. The next TF meeting is on May 7<sup>th</sup> and the next Joint WG/SCG is on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Meeting adjourned at 3:54PM.

Handouts:

1. Administrative Items
  - a. Agenda
  - b. Draft minutes, December 2019 meeting
2. Draft Task Force Action Items presentation
3. Tamiami Trail Next Steps (TTNS), Phase 2 presentation
4. SFWMD Program and Project Update presentation
5. USACE Program and Project Update
6. Lake Okeechobee Operations and Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) (verbal update, no handout)
7. Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS) Alternative Scenario presentation
8. Invasive Exotic Species
  - a. Presentation
  - b. Prioritization Exercise
9. System-wide Ecological Indicators section of the Biennial Report