

COMPREHENSIVE EVERGLADES RESTORATION PLAN (CERP) LAKE OKEECHOBEE SOM NEPA SCOPING MEETING

PUBLIC MEETING

February 6, 2019

6:00 P.M.

Indian River State College
Williamson Conference & Education Center
2229 NW 9th Avenue
Okeechobee, Florida

Corps Team Members:

Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Reynolds
E. Timothy Gysan, Project Manager
Jason Engle, Water Resource Engineering Manager
Jessica Mallett, Engineering Lead
Kim Taplin, Senior Program Manager
Andrew Geller, Operations Division
Allie Joura, Water Manager
Gary Hipkins, Operations Division
Douglas Padgett, South Atlantic Division
Gary Russ, Chief, Operations Division
Marci Jackson, Planning Technical Lead
John Campbell, Corporate Communications Office
Colin Rawls, Economist
Ann Hodgson, Environmental Lead
Erica Skolte, Corporate Communications Office

Esquire Reporting Service - Stuart and Fort Pierce, Florida

(Whereupon, the following is a transcript of the proceedings had on February 6, 2019:)

LT. COLONEL REYNOLDS: Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. I apologize, I missed the five-minute warning and was waiting for it. I looked at my watch and realized I'm three minutes late. So I apologize for not getting started on time.

I'm Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Reynolds and I want to thank y'all for coming out tonight. It's really important that you're here. I was talking to some people just before this meeting and I said one of the concerns that I have as we go through this process is that we have really large population bases on the coastal communities, really large, and we have really small population bases in the communities around the Lake. So it's really important that we make time and locations available for the communities here around the Lake so that your voices are heard.

And I want to encourage you to look around and your friends and neighbors that weren't able to come tonight, we would like to hear comments from them by e-mail, letter or phone call as well. And so if you have any trouble with being able to make comments to us or any of your friends or neighbors having trouble making comments to us, please let us know so that we can make sure that their voices are heard. It's really important for all of this process.

I see a lot of familiar faces around the room. So thanks for being here. And we also have a lot of elected officials here. So I have a list, and I apologize in advance if I didn't get your name. Please make sure that we do, because after our presentation when we start the public comment period, we will start with the elected officials and then go to the rest of the public comment cards.

And so we'll call the names of the public officials first, but I just want to recognize the folks that are here, in order only on how they're on my sheet, not necessarily in order of location or anything else.

So Chairman Terry Burroughs from Okeechobee County. Thank you, sir.

Mayor of Okeechobee, Mayor Watford. I saw him come in. Thank you, Mayor.

Mayor of the City Commission of Stuart, Becky Bruner.

County Commissioner David Hazellief.

COMMISSIONER HAZELLIEF: Right here.

LT. COLONEL REYNOLDS: Commissioner Tim Stanley from Glades County.

City Councilman Bobby Keefe.

From Okeechobee Board of County Commissioners, Bryant Culpepper.

And from Okeechobee Board of County Commissioners also, Commissioner Bradley Goodbread.

So all the Commissioners are over here guarding the door so that you can't leave until you make your comment.

Thank you, gentlemen.

So tonight why are we here? We're here to talk about how Lake Okeechobee is managed. We know we're going to get some comments on some other things, I've already heard some other topics tonight. One of the topics that I know is near and dear to a lot of folks' hearts that are in here, that you're mad about, that you're frustrated about, that some of you were here for before, one of those topics might be the water storage project north of the Lake. We did a public meeting here about that. We're happy to take comments about that. That's not what we're here for, to talk about tonight. The Lake Okeechobee schedule doesn't actually introduce any new infrastructure.

Another topic that I heard some things about is about aquatic plants. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is actually holding another public meeting here in Okeechobee at the Civic Center tomorrow night at 5:30. I would encourage y'all to come out to their public meeting tomorrow night. We will also have a team from the Corps that's there to talk about the aquatic plants, spraying on the Lake, spraying in canals and that sort of thing. That's the topic of the public meeting tomorrow night.

Again, we welcome your comments on any topic, but the ones most relevant to us tonight have to do with the Lake Okeechobee schedule; how we manage water on the Lake, how we manage Lake levels, how we handle releases north -- that's north -- put releases into the Lake from the north, managing releases to the east and the west, and managing releases south. So that's what our team is going to talk about tonight.

And what I want to tell you is that one of the reasons why we've changed the name of LORS to the acronym LOSOM, the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual is because, "A", we know that we have to think about this as a holistic system. None of this operates independently, and the water doesn't care what our manual says. And so we have to think about it holistically.

The second reason is because we are fundamentally changing the way that we think about managing water. We are not just updating LORS, but we're looking at the priorities, we're looking at the benefits, we're looking at how we measure things and the impacts of all those actions and taking a look from a clean sheet of paper on how we manage the water. Now, we're not forgetting anything we've learned over the past decades, but why your voice is so important is because priorities determine what we do. As the Army and as the Corps of Engineers, we are in the service of the nation and that means that we work for you. So your voice is critically important to this process.

With that, I'm going to turn it over to Tim and have him introduce the team and give a presentation to you.

MR. GYSAN: Thank you, ma'am. So tonight we're kind of switching things up a little bit and Marci, our Planning Technical Lead, is actually going to do the presentation, but I'll introduce our team to everyone.

So everyone from the Corps team can go ahead and stand up and I'll let everyone know who is here. In case you guys have any specific questions, you can approach them after the meeting.

Again, my name is Tim Gysan, I'm the Project Manager for this effort. Starting down here on the end, you have Jason Engle, he's the Water Resource Engineering Branch Chief. Next to him is Jessica Mallett. She's our Engineering Lead for this effort. Next to her is Kim Taplin, she's Senior Program Manager for the Corps. Next to her is Andrew Geller representing our Operations Division. Next to him is Allie Joura, she's a Water Manager. Next to her is Gary Hipkins, also part of our Operations Division.

MR. PADGETT: Do I have to --

MR. GYSAN: You don't have to. Okay.

MR. PADGETT: Douglas Padgett, South Atlantic Division, Atlanta, Georgia.

MR. GYSAN: And next to him, also Gary Russ, the Chief of our Operations office down in Clewiston. And Marci Jackson, our Planning Technical Lead for the effort. John Campbell from our Corporate Communications Office. Colin Rawls, our economist for this effort. Ann Hodgson, our Environmental Lead. And Erica Skolte, also from our Corporate Communications Office.

Again, thank you, everyone, for coming out tonight. It's real important that we hear what you guys have to say, what concerns you, what's important to you. That's to help us establish what the framework of this effort is going to look like. So with that, I'll go ahead and turn it over to Marci for a short presentation.

MS. JACKSON: Thank you, Tim.

All right. So as Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds said, and Tim, we're all here to look at a System Operating Manual for Lake Okeechobee.

So just going to give a real brief history. A lot of you I'm sure already know all this, but I just wanted to make sure we're all starting on the same page.

(Whereupon, the formal PowerPoint presentation was given and has been omitted from this transcript per instruction.)

MS. JACKSON: So now I'm going to turn it over to Jason Engle who will do the public comment period.

LT. COLONEL REYNOLDS: I'll turn on the microphone for you.

MR. ENGLE: Good evening, everyone. Thanks for taking the time to come out. Again, we're here to get your comments and I just wanted to set the stage before we start. We have about 18 people. We want to give everyone a couple minutes to make their comments. There is a court reporter that will take them down. And I think you heard about the official NEPA process. You know, the answer is posted to your questions down the road. Today we're in listening mode. It's not going to be a question-and-answer session because we want to give everyone time to provide us their input on this process so that we can come back for those workshops in May and those will be a two-way conversation and we can talk about how we took your concerns and incorporated them into the plan and get more comments on that plan in finally going forward.

So as I said, there will be a court reporter, there will be a record published in the end. Individuals who submitted a card tonight will be called roughly in the order that they submitted their card. I said we have about 18. When you come up to the mic, it will be this microphone on my right, your left, and I would like for you to state your name and any group that you're affiliated with that you want to announce.

We have a few elected officials that I put up front and from there, like I said, we'll just take people in the order that they arrived tonight.

So the first name is Bryant Culpepper, Okeechobee City Commissioner --

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: County.

MR. ENGLE: County, I'm sorry.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: He's already gone.

MR. ENGLE: Very well. Next is David Hazellief, Okeechobee County Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER HAZELLIEF: I didn't put down to speak.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, sir.

And finally Dowling Watford, Mayor.

MAYOR WATFORD: Thank you very much. Dowling Watford, Mayor of the City of Okeechobee.

I would like to thank the Corps for scheduling meetings here. It's nice, as the Lieutenant Colonel said, that our citizens have the opportunity. And I appreciate you giving them that. I know that the Corps is in a delicate position. You're in a no-win position here because you have all these competing projects and purposes that this must meet; flood control, water supply, recreation, environmental impacts, wildlife, navigation. So you have all of these competing positions that you have to consider.

And I appreciate your comments about the coast. My friends on the coast that I deal with quite often of course want no discharges. Period. And we all know that that's not possible and not practical. And so we must work from there and we must come up with a solution.

It's very important to us. The Lake level, of course, is important to us and especially low Lake levels. If it gets below 12.5, we know we have navigation problems and it really affects our local economy with the recreational fishermen. Plus water supply. So to us that's very important, the local economy and the recreational use of the Lake and water supply. And of course, flood control is always number one on that list.

We all know that lakes have a natural cycle, and that's not a surprise to anybody. And that's how I would judge success, how well you can duplicate that natural cycle between flooding, droughts. As we all know, that's the way it always has worked.

But I would encourage you to use science and not politics to determine how to do that. We all know that there's been a lot of pressure --

(Applause.)

MAYOR WATFORD: We all know there's been a lot of pressure politically on the Corps and on South Florida Water Management District. And the political aspects should not be considered, it should just be science.

We all know that the integrated delivery schedule has a great solution. We're trying to -- a lot of people are trying to find solutions, quick fixes. There's no magic bullet. We all know that and we need to understand that, that there's no magic bullet. By changing the Lake's schedule, it's not going to solve problems that we're getting complaints about, the algae and red tide and whatever else they want to complain about. And that's probably not going to solve those problems.

So we need to follow the science that has already been developed. And you need to -- and I think in all of this, we also have to keep in consideration the future growth of Florida, the economic development that is occurring in Florida, plus all the projects that will be completed between the dike and the reservoirs. So we have to consider those. But I would just encourage you to use science for whatever solutions you come up with.

Thank you.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, Mayor.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Next, we wanted to give any of the other elected officials who we announced earlier or any that have arrived since then an opportunity to come up and speak if you're inclined to do so.

COUNCILMAN KEEFE: Bobby Keefe, City Council of Okeechobee. I wasn't going to speak because I'm not very smart on any of the environmental issues or Lake levels and what-have-you. I did grow up here in Okeechobee fishing on the Lake. But what I am familiar with as an officer in the United States Marine Corps is government and military manuals and how they're written and why they're written. And then how they apply when you get into the field.

And I would just caution the Army Corps of Engineers and those powers-that-be to listen very closely to those that are living in this arena, Lake Okeechobee, and how it affects us and how we operate and live in this environment. When you're far removed from the battlefield, it's difficult, but easy to throw out policy and procedures. But when you're boots on the ground, it's a different story. So that's -- that's all I have.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: So we're going to start now with -- I'm sorry.

COMMISSIONER STANLEY: I'm Tim Stanley with Glades County Commission.

It's going to be a very delicate balance to try to do this. I don't see where we're going to change much, anyway, up and down. But they tried to raise the Lake years ago. They came in, they bought out Sportsman Village, bought all the fish camps out around the Lake, raised up Highway 78 at the Fish Eating Creek, pulled the Lake up I think to 18 feet and found out that all the marshes were dying and they had to lower it back down. And that was a big boon to our economy with all the fish camps leaving and everything. And even taking it down to ten feet, our local economy was gone. We might as well forget it. And once you take it down to ten and if it doesn't rain, it's going to drop to six. And then when the whole coast in South Florida gets salt in their wells and need water, who is going to do that?

So I don't see where you're going to change much. So that's my opinion. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Are there any more elected officials? I don't want to pass over anyone.

All right. So we'll start the public comment period, then.

First three names, Eric Anthony, Pat Anthony, and John Pearce.

MR. ERIC ANTHONY: Eric Anthony, I live in Buckhead Ridge. And I farmed in Ohio for I guess 60 years or 70, and I've been fishing on the Lake since '69 and been spending the winters, since '78 I think, been spending the winters. And I've seen a lot of change on the Lake. And over all these years, I never figured that there would be a meeting with the Corps that I could comment on what my opinion is. And I probably made a lot of opinions, like a lot of you other people have. Whether they're right or wrong, it's not going to change overnight. But I think it's like the Mayor says; it needs to be done with science instead of who is getting their palm greased. I think that's -- in my opinion, that's what has been happening for years. I think we're just going to have to sit down and everybody give it their best -- best estimate or whatever.

Because I know when you get this plan all down, there's one thing you got to remember. There's a white swan. If nobody knows what that is, that is something totally unexpected that's going to happen. You have to have in your plan what you do when that happens.

And, you know, we've seen that in the farming community. You know, you don't know whether Russia buys wheat or this or that or whatever. You have an extreme drought and it changes everything you've ever planned. And you have to have some plans in for those things when they happen.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. After Pat Anthony and John Pearce, it's Gary Ritter.

MR. JOHN PEARCE: Hi, how y'all doing? It might be off the topic a little bit, but, you know, the channeling of the river, it all started at one place and that's where the big mouse is. The problem is when you talk about operating the Lake at a certain level, the main culprit that started the problem we have now is still there. If you go up to St. Cloud, Kissimmee, the building never stops. You see buildings, houses, cypress trees. Cypress trees, I'm pretty sure, grows in a wetland. So if you keep building around these cypress trees, that's more water that has to come this way. So instead of 10 percent, the way we used to get 40 years ago, we got 200 percent more water coming. Every day there's more water coming. There's no way to control it down here when it's steadily coming downstream. And there's all kinds -- you want to put a reservoir in down here. Everything that is down here, everything's agriculture, everything's sugar farming, the main problem is north. You keep sending all that water south, you can't take it.

It's no different than if you pull up to gas your car up at a gas station and they've just got a 55-gallon drum with a hose and they give you that hose and no nozzle on the end. You got a 12-gallon tank, it's going to spill. And until you go north and you start cutting down on what's going on up there...

Fort Myers is the same way. You got cypress trees and you got houses. You can't keep filling in the wetlands and sending the water where there ain't enough room already. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. After John Pearce and Gary Ritter, we'll have David Walker.

MS. PAT ANTHONY: Wait a minute. My name is Pat Anthony. As I was getting up, he already spoke.

MR. ENGLE: Yes, ma'am.

MS. PAT ANTHONY: I like -- my name is Pat -- thank you. My name is Pat Anthony and I've been coming here since 1967. I'm not really a fisherman, but I know -- I go out and I enjoy being on the Lake and I can say since 1967 this Lake is really in bad shape. I'm hoping that you listen to some of the stuff that people have said. I thought the Mayor made a very good point over here.

This has been the most beautiful place in the world. Yeah, you know, some places weren't too hot. When is the last time we ever had a -- did we have a flood recently? You know, they're working on redoing it, but did we ever have a flood since the ones in the -- that the dike was built for? I mean, but all the people in here that are fishermen have been fishing here for a long time and everything in this Lake, they know what's changed. And I think you need to get some people that are born and raised or live here full-time on some of these committees because these are the people who know what is going on with this lake. And this lake is in so bad a shape. We went over to -- what's the name of that place? I never can remember, it's over by Fort Myers.

MR. ERIC ANTHONY: Corkscrew Sanctuary.

MS. PAT ANTHONY: Yeah, Corkscrew. I went over there one time and I said to the lady, "Geez, you've got cabbage here floating around." And I listed all the things that I've seen out there on the Lake. I said "Why is it protected here, but over there they can take that stinking spray boat and spray the whole damn place?" And she looked at me and she said "Well, it's not indigenous of Okeechobee, but it's indigenous of Corkscrew." How in the heck can it be indigenous of Corkscrew, but where the big water is there's nothing indigenous in Okeechobee?

Well, there really isn't probably any more.

We just would like you to really do something really serious with the Lake. I mean, I know I'm speaking for fishermen, you know, and they're probably not as important as the people over on the West Coast or the East Coast or whoever is getting stupid water from here. But let me tell you something, the fishermen over here came here for a reason. Because they love this place. And I mean, you know, I have to go over to the coast to shop, you know, but I love -- I love this place or I wouldn't be here, I would be over on the coast.

So I hope that they listen to some of the people that are worried about the Lake, not just the -- whether we sell baits or something like that, you know.

But please, please listen to the people who love this place, you know. And I'm from Buckhead Ridge, so... I'm not from Okeechobee. But thank you for listening anyway.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Next we have John Pearce, Gary Ritter, David Walker.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: I think John already spoke.

MR. GARY RITTER: Good evening, I'm Gary Ritter

and I represent the Florida Farm Bureau Federation. I've also lived in Okeechobee for 42 years, raised my family here. I've worked and -- worked on the Lake, I've recreated on the Lake and, like I say, we've lived here for 42 years. So I think we -- we as a County, I think the comments that I make today represent a lot of the feelings of the County because our organization represents about 147,000 families. Many of these families are right here in Okeechobee. Many of the families are part of the County Commission. I am also a former City Councilman. And it's kind of ironic tonight because last night they had Council Member comment and unfortunately I never got to partake in that. So tonight maybe these are what I probably would have presented had I been on the Council at the meeting last night.

Our families in the Farm Bureau are well aware of the complexities of managing Lake Okeechobee. Together as a Farm Bureau family, we establish policies concerning many issues and they're always based -- and here again, our Mayor commented -- they are always based on sound science and engineering. Our policies support State and Federal programs, along with research conducted by academic and scientific institutions as long as they are based on sound science and engineering principles and not on emotion.

The Corps has just begun the process to adopt a new Regulation Schedule for Lake Okeechobee, with the goal of having the schedule in place when the Hubert Hoover Dike is completed in 2022. The new Regulation Schedule must pass all project purposes, including flood control, water supply, recreation, navigation, and environmental effects to fish and wildlife. The reduction of flood releases to the estuary is important to us, as it should be, but not the only objective of Lake management. Should not be the only objective of Lake management.

Critical project purposes cannot be met by simply artificially lowering the level of Lake Okeechobee to some arbitrary stage of let's say 10.5 that we've all heard every year as some have suggested, or by allowing prolonged excessively high stages during wet years. Lake navigation starts to be restricted at this stage of 12.5. And it particularly impacts recreation. And boaters don't always use navigation channels. There's not a whole lot of navigation channels on Lake Okeechobee.

The recently updated Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule, the biological opinion from 2018 confirms that excessive low Lake levels can also adversely affect habitat and endangered species. Future economic and environmental needs of all of South Florida, including inland rural communities will only be accomplished through development of a balanced schedule in which all project purposes are addressed.

Because of the precarious condition of the Herbert Hoover Dike when the current schedule was adopted, water supply benefits had to be sacrificed and the protections established in the Water Resources Development Act of 2000 for CERP were not able to be honored. The new schedule must accommodate future water supply needs and CERP projects that will be coming online with this schedule in place, such as was mentioned, C-43, C-44, and the stormwater treatment area. Therefore,

the water supply protection required of all CERP projects must be accommodated with any new Lake Regulation Schedule. The Corps should take the necessary time to perform comprehensive analysis to all -- in order to produce a schedule that is responsive to all the future needs of the region and not hurry the process because of political pressure.

Conditionally, the Farm Bureau stands in support of moving forward with the evaluation of the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule. Recommendations have to be based on real science and engineering and not on preconceived decision-making that ignores the safety and the economic sustainability of the Lake communities and the legal mandate to maintain an adequate water supply for permanent users.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Just wanted to remind everybody, in order for everyone to have a chance to speak tonight in the time that we have, we want to try to keep the comments to two minutes. We want all of the comments, anything written -- or if you have anything prepared, feel free to submit it in writing. Those comments have the same weight as being spoken here in this room. I just want you all to understand that.

Next is David Walker. And after that is Andrew and Paula Hatchett and Jeff Sumner.

MR. DAVID WALKER: My name is David Walker, and I don't represent anybody except a whole lot of fishermen and people that love Lake Okeechobee and the City of Okeechobee. And I know the economy relies on what happens to that Lake.

I lived in Tampa for 30 years and I bought a place in Okeechobee in 2000 and I come down here and spend a lot of time. I have since moved out of state, but I spend all of my winters here. I would hate to see the Lake get below 12 and a half feet, because I even had a bad day today; I hit a rock with my boat and I tore up the propeller. So that was because of the low water. Had the water been up at 14 or so, I would not have hit that. I've been over that spot a million times. But I realize that they have a problem trying to -- there's many different reasons why they have to maintain different levels on the Lake, but the years that I have been here, the only poor fishing I've seen was after Hurricane Jeanne and Frances. The Lake got real low with two years of drought after that, and that was my reason for moving out of state. I said "I'm going to be an old man before the Lake gets good enough to fish." And it was about 2008, '9, '10, and '11 it come back and it has been fabulous. And the water level of 15 and a half to 12 and a half feet I think is perfect. I understand what happened last year with the hurricane and the Lake was muddy, and I can see why they would want to get it lower, so that the sun can get down through and get the weeds growing. But if they get it down to ten feet, places that we fish now would be bone dry. So they can go out there and mow the grass, they won't have to have any hydrilla or any other aquatic vegetation.

So that's all I've got to say. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Next is Andrew and Paula Hatchett, Jeff Sumner, and then Johnny Burroughs, Commissioner of the City of Belle Glade.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

MR. ENGLE: Jeff Sumner.

MR. JEFF SUMNER: My name is Jeff Sumner, I'm an engineering consultant here in Okeechobee and I'm also currently the Chair of the Economic Council of Okeechobee, and it's in that capacity that I'm speaking. Appreciate the opportunity.

I want to echo a few of the things that Mr. Ritter mentioned in encouraging you to take your time in this process. It's a fairly aggressive schedule. I appreciate all of the public meetings, but they're happening very quickly and the opportunity to comment, at least in the NEPA phase, is closing very quickly and I would -- I would encourage you to maybe not succumb to political pressures to maybe run the Lake lower and make sure you take your time and make sure the process is based on sound science.

You're going to hear a couple comments tonight regarding water supply, I know, relative to agriculture, but I want to talk a little bit about water supply relative to our community here in Okeechobee. The Lake is the primary source of water for the Okeechobee Utility Authority. That supply and the ability to have that water for future development was curtailed pretty significantly in the process of LORS '08. For that reason, I would suggest that not -- using LORS '08 as the base condition for your current analysis is not appropriate and you should really be going all the way back to WSC as your base condition.

I want to keep this inside of two minutes, so I'm going to go ahead and stop there. We do look forward to continuing the dialogue and submitting written comments.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Next is Commissioner Johnny Burroughs.

COMMISSIONER BURROUGHS: Good evening, everyone. Being we only have two minutes, I'll go ahead and just kind of read straight down my notes.

Thank everyone for coming out and participating in this situation because it's dear to all of our hearts, from Okeechobee, South Bay, Belle Glade, and all the cities around the Lake.

While we greatly appreciate everything that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has done to protect the cities south of the Lake by fortifying the dike, it's important that we all stand together because Lake Okeechobee is the lifeblood for all of our communities. It supports the vast agricultural industry of all of our communities, it is responsible for 65 percent of the jobs, especially in the Glades area, Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee. Outside of that, it's the primary driver of our tourist attractions in the community. And I know we've invested a lot of money and petitioned our legislators at the State to help us make infrastructure improvements so that we can improve the economic sustainability of our community.

And yes, we have heard the Congressman's rhetorical statements about keeping the Lake low or to the point of no water at all. But something like that really hurts our tourist attractions, it definitely hurts the fishing. Because like my family grew up not only as farm workers, but we also relied on the Lake for a source of food supply. There are some people who fish for sport, but there are some of us that fish to make a living.

Please do not support what the Congressman has already said, because there are people like myself who have been able to benefit from the agricultural industry to go to college and come back home to fight for these type of purposes so that we can continue to sustain our way of life.

I invite him, as well as others who take an opposite position from us to come to our community to see what it's like to be a resident here, to know what it's like to be a farmer; not a city boy, to know what it's like to go out and fish, to know what it's like to take your kids to see some of the gators laying around the bank, to take pictures there. To know what it's like to see what a real natural nature preserve is like. It is a totally different experience from what the city boys have on the coast. They wouldn't understand. And if you haven't lived here, you haven't been here enough, like the gentleman said, he actually moved here because of our way of life. It is the only type of community where you can go and still see children come outside and play every day.

I'll kind of sum it up by basically saying we really know that the Congressman -- we know they make bills to try to put things in place and they want to push their legislative agendas ahead. But we understand that the decisions and things that happen around the Lake is in the hands of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. And we want you guys to really help to continue with those improvements so that we can sustain the dike in its current state, so we can improve it for better conditions for our community, so that we can live, grow, and continue to develop our families here.

Thank you all.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, Commissioner Burroughs. Next we have Philip Baughman, Brad Phares, and then Keith Pearce.

MR. PHILIP BAUGHMAN: I want to thank what the people have said so far. I just want to add a few things.

Twenty-something years of Don Fox, who managed our Lake pretty well, said to me in a meeting at then it was the barbecue spot where people raises it now, he did a big presentation on growing the fish and what it would take to manage the Lake. Of course, he did the cleaning of the Lake back in, I believe it was late nineties, I guess it was, when we got our piles (phonetic). He said "If you don't maintain this lake at at least 14, the life of the Lake will not sustain the life of the Lake. It will die. You won't have your marshes, you won't have your birds, you won't have your fish, you won't have a place for the fish to grow and come out. Same with your alligators, same with the birds, ducks, the whole nine yards.

I wasn't going to talk about spraying tonight, but if you go out to the Lake now, it's basically a dead lake already. They have killed it with the spray. There's nothing there. I couldn't even catch a fish. I hear people say they're catching fish. I couldn't catch one Thanksgiving weekend. Two years ago I could catch fish. But if you lower the Lake in the shape that it's in right now, it would probably be extremely devastating. I doubt you'll ever have a marsh again because it's all dead. Everything that's on the top now will float to the bottom and nothing will grow back. I mean, that's what poison does. It kills everything and doesn't let it grow back.

So you got to keep the Lake up. Two things you got to do with the Lake. You got to keep it up to maintain the health of the Lake and you got to maintain the health of our economy by keeping the Lake up. You got to maintain the Lake up to keep salt intrusion from coming into the wells. You got to

maintain the Lake for the validity of the whole structure of the Lake. If you lower the Lake, you just have a little pond, a little puddle that gets stagnant and grows things that's not healthy so when you do discharge that, and you have to, you will probably create an algae bloom that you've never seen before.

My father-in-law has fished the Lake for the last fifty years. He remembers the algae out there that you had to cut with a boat just to lay a fishing line. So the algae is not something new; it's just something new to the folks on the East Coast. But it's always been here. It doesn't mean that we've created the problem over there.

So you guys are talking about this tonight and it seems as though all of a sudden because we have a problem on the East Coast, now we have to fix the Lake to make that problem go away. That's not going to fix the problem. The Lake is not going to fix the algae problem on the East Coast. The algae is always there and it's always going to be there. But don't ruin our Lake to try to appease somebody when you can't fix it. And that's going to end up happening when you start playing games with the Lake level.

(Applause.)

MR. BRAD PHARES: My name is Brad Phares, I'm a local rancher here. Our ranch is located on the western shore of Lake Okeechobee. And the last time I was in this room, I was giving everybody a little bit of grief about the proposed reservoir project, and I won't get into that tonight because it's not why we're here.

My point is I may give you guys a bunch of grief at one point, but I'm going to turn right around and congratulate you and applaud your efforts when it's deserving of it. And I think overall, as Mayor Watford said, you're in a very precarious position where you're being pulled a lot of different ways, a lot of competing interests, and we all understand that. The problem is I'm not sure everybody on the coast understands that. And the problem is I'm not sure they want to understand it. I'm not sure they want to invest the time to do the research and do their own homework and learn these things. So I'm glad we have such a good turnout here.

I'll try and keep it short, stay in the two minutes. I reiterate what the common theme I've heard tonight is; the Lake should be managed based on science and the historical data that all of you have been able to amass over the time you've been doing it instead of succumbing to the Johnny-come-lately politicians who don't necessarily know what's going on, don't know all the history, don't know all the science. We should stick to science. We should stick to what has worked. Adjust where we think something needs to be adjusted, but stick to what has worked and learn and grow from there. If we just worry about bureaucrats and pandering to votes and that sort of thing, it's going to end up detrimental to everybody.

So thank you for your time.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Next Keith Pearce, George McEwan, and then John Hayford.

MR. KEITH PEARCE: Hi, I'm Keith Pearce, I own Pearce Ranch, Incorporated. My family has lived on the shore of Lake Okeechobee for over a hundred years. We have seen the water go up, we've seen the

water go down. We saw that happen before the dike was put around the Lake, which, by the way, is the root of the problem; the dike and the Kissimmee River. My family begged the Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management not to channelize the Kissimmee River. They did it anyway because there was political pressure. We're right back in that same position. Political pressure is pushing an issue that needs to be looked over very hard.

The natural level of Lake Okeechobee before the dike ran from 12 to 15 feet. It would come up, it would get out in the pastures, it would go down and get back out in the Lake. It filtered itself on the way to that Lake. It also exited the south end of that Lake and went through the Everglades and filtered even more.

So this whole problem has been created by the actions of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management. Therefore, I think they all need to take a very hard look at this problem. Because putting everybody around this Lake out of business is not going to solve it. I am faced right now with being put out of business. But right now at 12.2 or whatever the current Lake level is, which is pretty close to that, my place is like a desert, because my water table goes to the level of the Lake. And my ground is 15 and a half foot minimum.

Therefore, you're not going to solve it by going lower with the Lake. You're not going to solve it by going higher with the Lake. You've got to look to other areas. Start in Orlando. Start in Orlando. Stop the drainage and the -- everything from being dumped into that Lake. That's the problem.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you.

MR. GEORGE McEWAN: Good evening, my name is George McEwan, I'm a property owner in Taylor Creek. I've had a presence here in Okeechobee since 1971. My dad bought the place, I started coming in the winters, and I've lived here full-time since 2006. So I've seen a lot, too, for being a Yankee.

I won't speak to all the issues of how they're going to do this. My issue is with communication, the flow of information. And I'll tell you why.

I had occasion to try to contact the Army Corps of Engineers a few years back about the lock that was closed on Taylor Creek. It was going to be closed for seven months. They were doing some repairs to it. They closed it right after the Northerners went back north. Well, a year later it was still closed, and I tried to get some information about that. So I contacted them on their website and I -- I'll say it was a nice -- I wrote nice things, I wasn't bad or mean or anything, and made some suggestions about maybe a newsletter or something that would keep the local community updated on what was going on. I heard nothing from that.

And I would encourage everybody in this room that's connected with the Corps to not let that happen any more. You know, keep the flow of information going so that at least we know why things are happening.

And as a final comment, I'm going to bring up Brian Mast. Brian Mast would be better served when there's a problem on the East Coast to say "We've got some problems over here and when you guys discharge fresh water over here, it only makes it worse," rather than calling it a toxic discharge. That's

our drinking water he's talking about and I think it sends the wrong message to anybody that reads the newspapers.

Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Next is John Hayford, Matt Pearce, Dennis Fish.

MR. JOHN HAYFORD: Good evening. Thank you for allowing us to speak tonight. John Hayford, Okeechobee Utility Authority.

There's going to be a lot of people here talking about the recreational use, boating. Our interest is our Lake intake. As much of the local residents know, we have two intakes in the Lake. I have been asked several times this week about the elevation of those intakes as to how low they can go with the Lake so it doesn't impact. And I gave that information to a lot of the folks that asked.

For the record, it's at -- the invert of one pipe is at six feet and the other one is at zero. But that is not the issue that we would find here. Our issue is more inclined towards the sedimentation, the shoals that all the boaters have run into, the airboaters. Those elevations are unknown. What those elevations are, are the idea that would keep the Lake water from getting to our intakes.

So I would only suggest to the Corps before they get too far into the process, find out how the sandbars, the land bridges, the bottom sediments, what those have done to prevent the water from being able to get to our intakes so that as they contemplate going to a lower level, it will not restrict the Lake water from getting to the intakes and becoming a problem to the City of Okeechobee, Okeechobee County and the Buckhead Ridge area.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. MATT PEARCE: Good afternoon, Matt Pearce. I represent Pearce Cattle Company and Rockhill Ranch, Glades County landowners. Unlike a lot of the guys that have spoke here tonight, I have lived in Okeechobee for 48 years. And like Keith said, my family has ranched along the western shore of Lake Okeechobee for over a hundred years. So our people have seen a lot of what happens.

One thing I'll say about the Lake is it's a natural system and it's going to go up and it's going to go down. I think that's what we need to look at.

I thank the Corps for taking time to let us come out and speak. One thing that I heard early on in the meeting is that this is a coastal community versus inland community. And I don't believe that. And I've heard some folks comment about the Congressman who I think politically is bullying a lot of the folks in the interior, most of us in this room. You know, what do we do to combat that? We've got to get up and speak and let our voice be heard or we're going to get continually run over by the folks on the coast.

One of my points is that everybody said there's a lot of competing interests. I see us all in this together. The fisherman, the cattlemen, the farmers, the community, our elected officials, we're all in this

together. We all got to come up with the same solution. So I would go back to what Dowling said; this needs to be a science-based effort. When you look at the science, you need to look at the history, like Jeff said. And we don't need to succumb to political pressure, we need to keep it science-based and don't let the emotions get involved. We need to all get it out on the table.

I hear about the toxic releases. I don't know if anybody has been to anybody's funeral that has died from Lake water from algae. And that guy that is clapping is the guy that provides us with our water. I don't say that to be comical, I say that because I read this every day. I try to keep up with this. You know, I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. You know, if the District wants to take our land and build a reservoir and if that's the best thing to do, I'm sure that my family will agree that that's the best thing to do. But we don't think that that's the best thing to do, so we're in opposition, and I think that most everybody here is in opposition, but I don't feel like that's being articulated.

But anyway, I'll go back to my point about the dead people or anybody's funeral. I just don't see that. So I think we need to get realistic and push back from these toxic blooms.

I'll tell you one quick story. I was on my horse the other day and we went up to a water trough that didn't have any flowing water to it, it was just water, and there was algae in it. Okay? You can go up to a pond out there and it's got algae in it. But I can go to fresh water where water is flowing, it's got a float on, and there's no algae in it. The algae comes when you don't move the water and that's what the people on the coast don't understand.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Next Dennis Fish, Mike Krause.

MR. DENNIS FISH: Everything has been said. I pass, everything has been said.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, sir. Mike Krause. And after that we'll have Mickey Bandi and then Mark Stewart.

MR. MIKE KRAUSE: Mike Krause, Okeechobee Fishing Headquarters. Most of you -- I recognize a lot of faces in here. Most of you guys and ladies have been in our businesses and this is kind of about business to us. We understand the science-based. I think everybody -- all of that has been covered well enough tonight.

Here is probably one of the things that we need to look at. The Lake needs to be healthy. In order to keep the Lake healthy, the water levels need to go down, they need to come up. We all understand that. The operating range of 12 and a half to 15 and a half feet I think is a little high, I think it could come down a little bit. In times of -- the issue becomes in times of drought what do you do if the Lake is already at 12 feet. I understand it's a complex system. I understand that you guys have to move water, you guys have to guess at what Mother Nature is going to do. Mother Nature is going to take care of this Lake. Whether it goes up, whether it comes down, Mother Nature will take care of it.

Continue to -- continue to come to these meetings. Continue to push forward. I encourage all of you to go tomorrow night. That's especially important to us because of the health of the Lake.

Right now, to be honest with everyone in here, the Lake needs to go down below 12 feet. It needs to go down below 11 feet so that the Lake can clean up. I see people saying no, it doesn't, because of the

fishing. It's not about the fishing. Think back in 2006 and 2007. 2006 we were really high, 2007 we came down to really low. 2008 and nine we went back up. 2008 really high, 2009 it got back down to manageable. And it was said earlier, '10, '11, '12, '13, and '14 were five of the most phenomenal years we've seen on this Lake in a long time. Businesses thrived very well. Last year it was absolutely phenomenal. We just reopened the business. I have a partner in the business, we reopened the business September 2017, and it was amazing to see the people that came down and fished in our waters, that came down because their neighbors called them and told them. Now what is happening right now is as the Lake is -- as the Lake needs to clean itself, as the Lake needs to help itself, rather than us being involved quite so much, we're getting phone calls of people that aren't coming. "Don't come, the Lake is not good. The Lake is not healthy. The Lake is toxic. The fishing is bad. The Lake level is too low to move." That's not what we need.

Keep engaging with South Florida Water Management, keep engaging with Army Corps of Engineers, keep engaging with Fish and Wildlife Corporation -- or Conservation Commission.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Next we have Mickey Bandi, Mark Stewart, Billy Locker.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Mickey is gone.

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, sir. Mark Stewart?

MR. MARK STEWART: Hi, Mark Stewart. I'm from Illinois, a/k/a a snowbird, okay? Part of normal life, I understand what you do with Mother Nature, she'll kick your butt. She doesn't mind. But you got to go with it and back again. Science -- the Mayor, I think, summed it up really good. You have to go on an average.

1985 my mom and dad located here for the winter. I come down, I thought "I kind of like this place. I'm going to start saving my pennies, my nickels, I'm going to retire here." Well, I did two or three years ago. And it's a nice place, I love it. I want us to keep coming here. My mother is in bad health and I'm going to take over their place. Today I happened to be cleaning out her place and I found a paper from West Palm Beach. "Lake Okeechobee Fighting for Its Life." March 12th, 1989. This ain't something new, you know.

I think you're kind of like a doctor, you're practicing medicine, you're not -- you know, you're doing the same thing over and over. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. You've been fixing the dike since, what, the nineties? You know, when I farmed, if we got a wet flow and we're behind, we go lease another combo, put more machines out there, let's get that job done. Why does it have to wait until 2022? Then we don't have to worry so much about the Lake levels and the releases.

That's all I've got to say. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you. Billy Locker and then Dr. Paul Gray.

MR. BILLY LOCKER: Thank you, guys. Boy, all the comments have got a lot of merit to them, no doubt about it.

I come here tonight because I'm a resident of Buckhead Ridge. I bought property there in 1997. I've seen lot of changes on that Lake. I've seen it at eight, I've seen it at 18. At eight, it's not a pretty sight. You could walk from -- from the lock at Buckhead Ridge, you could walk all the way to Okeetane Park when it's at eight. That's what it was.

I've had many conversations with Brian Mast through e-mails, through letters, and I've talked to him face to face after his meeting in October that he had in Stuart and told him he cannot -- I mean, this is where we were, this far apart (indicating) -- "You cannot destroy all the economies on the Lake to satisfy the constituents in Martin and St. Lucie Counties."

And I've been lucky to be associated with some longstanding families that were born and raised here, I moved here in '82, and we've had a lot of great times on that Lake. When the Lake is at eight or at ten or 11, you know, basically you cannot use the Lake. And if they -- Brian Mast, I mean I'm going to say it, that's who the guys are talking about, wants to drain it down to nothing. That's what he wants to do. And he was unreceptive to our conversation about his intentions. He doesn't understand. And I told him in that conversation, I said "Brian," I said, "if you have what -- have your way on this," I said "What will happen is that people that now are in your court, the people that are supporting you now, are going to be your enemies when they can't water their lawns, their golf courses, and their homes on the coast." Because I've seen it happen. Because I also still currently live in Lake Worth, I reside there part-time. And when I saw those drought restrictions and I saw what it does, and those people -- I mean, you know, they were up in arms. But he just doesn't want to hear about it.

And I am agreeing with the fellow that talked about it a minute ago; he's going down the wrong path. And I urge the County Commissioners in Glades and Okeechobee and Palm Beach if there's any here, they're going to have to get with our representatives and they're going to have to push back on this if we want Lake Okeechobee managed correctly. And it's a tough job. I mean, Florida's problem is, isn't it, too much water and not enough. It's too much in the summer and it's not enough in the winter.

I tell you, I feel for them, the job they've got to do, and South Florida Water Management because they put on a great presentation. You were there at that meeting on Flagler near Brian's office there in Stuart. I thought South Water Management put on a great presentation showing what has happened to the Lake.

And yes, to agree with the gentleman over there, they've all made mistakes. And they're probably going to make some more. But I came here today as a taxpayer, as a person -- or as speaking to the people that are paying the bills. We're paying the bills. It's the same issue with FWC and the spraying; we're paying the bills. We want to be put first. That's what I told Brian. It's the taxpayers first. We got a say in what we should have.

Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you.

DR. PAUL GRAY: Good evening, I'm Paul Gray, I work for Audubon of Florida. Audubon's worked in Okeechobee, we've had full-time staff here since 1936. And the first four Audubon employees were Chandler family members. Noel Chandler, who I'm sure you know, was our fourth one. And now they've got me. I've been working on the Lake about 30 years. This is my fifth Regulation Schedule study I've been associated with. And it doesn't sound like with all the problems we've had lately, but actually they've been better over time. In the eighties and nineties, they were way too deep and really wrecked the plant communities on the Lake. When we went to FWC it was better, but it still had some problems and was rather dangerous during summer when you have big storms that might come in. And LORS has been better. But LORS has allowed the Lake -- we just went through a period where the Lake hit 16 feet six years in a row. And in 2012, the first year it hit 16, we had more than 40,000 thousand acres of submerged plants, you know, pepper grass, eel grass, shrimp grass, you know, the submerged stuff that you fish in. By the end of -- by 2017 when Irma came in and made the Lake clear up to 17 feet, those plants were so sick and so beleaguered from getting in that deep water all the time, that basically Irma pretty much finished off the last of them. And we're down to 5,000 acres or so.

LORS is based on a stage envelope that goes between 12 and a half and 15 and a half. The first one of those proposals is 12 to 15. And basically when we look back at the data, if you go down to 12 feet, the following year your submerged plants tend to be really robust. And if you don't make it to 12, the next year they're not very good. And it's actually a big difference.

And so we're going to ask the Corps to try to look at that 12 to 15 stage envelope and say "How does that work; what's it do for modelling; what's it going to do with the submerged plants." And oddly enough, if we can make those submerged plants healthier, then when an Irma comes in and the water goes up, they're going to be strong, they're going to be resilient, and they're going to last for a while and we won't have to lose all of them. So low water actually helps with high water. And when I say 12 to 15, that's on average. The Lake does what it wants. Eleven is the part where we start getting nervous, that's getting too low. We don't want to go to that low a level. So we're not saying ten and a half or anything like that.

But that's what we're asking the Corps to do.

And I was on the Lake today for four hours doing a shore bird survey and this Lake just blows me away. I got down to Indian Prairie and there were so many birds around me and I was trying to count them, and I'm a scientist, and I have to tell you, I was like a thousand birds off. There were too many birds, too many places, they're flying in circles, I couldn't remember where I had been, and so I just wrote down some numbers.

This Lake is down, but it's not out. So thank you guys for coming out. Keep involved. Our voices need to be heard. We need this Lake managed better.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. ENGLE: Thank you, everyone. That was the end of the comment cards that we received.

This would conclude our meeting. What I would leave you with is that we had put out comment cards

outside, you can submit written comments to us today. You can sign up on the computers to get on the mailing lists. So toward the comment of how we can communicate with you, we will have the website updated, we'll have e-mail where you can reach us and submit your comments. We'll also be able to use your e-mails to reach you with updates on our study.

We're going to come back in May with the results of what we're going to do about these comments and we'll come back for a two-way conversation.

So we look forward to that. Thank you much for coming out.

(PROCEEDINGS CONCLUDED AT 7:21 P.M.)

STATE OF FLORIDA)

COUNTY OF MARTIN)

CERTIFICATE OF REPORTER

I, KATHY CABRE ENLOE, Registered Professional Reporter, do certify that in the matter of the LAKE OKEECHOBEE SOM NEPA SCOPING MEETING, a Public Meeting was held beginning at the hour of 6:00 P.M. on the 6th day of February, 2019; that I was authorized to and did stenographically report the proceedings in that Public Meeting, and that the foregoing pages, numbered 2 through 51, comprise a true and correct transcript of those proceedings.

DATED this 28th day of February, 2019.

KATHY CABRE ENLOE

(This file has been reformatted for presentation, which has changed the number of pages.)