ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS
LAKE OKEECHOBEE SYSTEM OPERATING MANUAL (LOSOM)

PUBLIC NEPA SCOPING MEETING

March 20, 2019
3:16 p.m. – 4:39 p.m.
Marathon Government Center
2798 Overseas Highway 2nd Floor
Marathon, Florida 33056

Electronically reported by:

Tyler Hentze, ECR

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Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Reynolds
Andrew Geller

With the Public Commenters:

Fred Ferreira
Dale Perez
Richard Garthwohl
Thomas Bartlett
Larry Fox
Lisa Carruthers
Dottio Moses
Cindy Lewis
Bruce Byrd
Michael Collins
Sandra Vandusea
Richard Trotta
Ross Boucek
Doug Gaston
Alina Davis
Jorge Abrey
David Denkert
Berry Gabler
Steve Thomas
Barry Newmann
Matthew Shwartz
Alex Gilien
Gerald Ward
Drusilla Fox

Elected Officials and Representatives of Elected Officials:

Debbie Macarsel-Powell
Congresswoman Katie Atkinds, on behalf of Michelle Coldiron
Megan Hilton, assistant to Cheryl Meads
Cheryl Meads
Sarah Craven, on behalf of State Representative Raschein
Michael Forster, Vice Mayor of Islamorada
Lea Padron, Regional Director for the Office of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio

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Proceedings

Public Hearing on the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM), proceeding before Tyler Hentze, Electronic Court Reporter and Notary Public in and for the State of Florida at Large in the above cause.

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Public Hearing:
Introduction

MS. REYNOLDS: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for being patient in letting us get started just a few minutes late.

I'd like to take just a moment to introduce the person who really helped make sure that a community meeting happened here in the Keys; and so Congresswoman, I'd like to turn the microphone over to you in just a minute, but thank you so much to representative Mucarsel-Powell for having us come down here. We know that it's really important for the voices of all of the communities to hear and provide input about the Lake Okeechobee regulations schedule or system operating manual; and we're here to talk about that tonight, but I'm going to turn the microphone over to the Congresswoman and let her make her opening remarks.

Statement from Congresswoman Debbie Mucarsel-Powell

MS. MUCARSEL-POWELL: Thank you.

Good afternoon everyone. It's so great to see some friendly faces and for those of you who I quite haven't met yet, I represent the Congresswoman for Florida's 26th District, which includes all of Monroe County and the southern and west part of Miami-Dade County.

It's always good to see all of you and to be down at home. You know, I spend a lot of time now in Washington, D.C. so it's tough to get down as often as I wish.

But before I begin, I really want to thank and express my gratitude to Colonel Andrew Kelly and for Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Reynolds and everyone in the Army Corps of Engineers, Monroe County and -- Sugar who worked together to make this meeting happen.

I know that a lot of you had to jump through some hoops to make it down here, but I can't tell you how important it is for us to have the opportunity to give input as you start planning the new plan for Lake Okeechobee and the plans for that.

For those of you that know me well, I talk about water all the time. I've spent the last three years campaigning for clean water. And my family, my friends, all of us are completely dependent on having high quality clean water for our children, for our entire livelihood. So, one of the first things that I did was, join the Everglades Caucus.

And I immediately pushed the part of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and I am now the second ranking member in the Water Subcommittee, because I understand all the problems that

we have with the sceptic tanks, with the lack of infrastructure investment and it's crucial for our community and for our progress.

The operation of the Lake Okeechobee Water Management System has a direct effect on the health and the livelihood of Florida Keys Community members. Our residents directly rely on the management of Lake Okeechobee for dry and wet season flows to Florida Bay. And without sufficient dry and wet seasons flows to Florida Bay, our local environment suffers catastrophic harm. Harm to Florida Bay results in the devastation to all –- everyone that I represent in this community.

Put more simply, every action that the Army Corp of Engineers takes in Lake Okeechobee, has a direct impact down here in the Everglades, Florida Bay and everyone that lives in our community. Every single drop that gets sent down from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, gives our community another moment to thrive.

That water charges our aquifer, prevents saltwater intrusion, provides us with fresh seafood and resources; and allows the people of Monroe County to enjoy the way of life that makes them so unique.

On the other hand, when that water is not made available, the community has suffered terrible consequences. We've seen thousands of bakers -- of seagrass die off in the Florida Bay. We've all seen the terrible consequence on the canals, infesting them with green algae. We've had poor water quality. It's been –- and it's impacted negatively to our marine life, to our fisheries, to our entire economic livelihood in the Keys.

So, I'm here today to ask you, that you please carefully consider all of the feedback that you will hear today from everyone that's here, and from over 1,700 Floridians that have come to public meetings like this one during the past month. As I've said several times, we all depend on the research that you are going to be conducting and the conclusions that you will reach, and the decisions that you're going to be making. To South Florida, water is life. We cannot live without it. And it is one of my top priorities as the Congresswoman for this District, to do everything I can to protect our water. In return, I promise that I will do my part.

This year, my colleague representative, Aussie Hasings (phonetically) and I are leading this year's appropriations request for Everglades funding. And we have asked and we're urging Congress to set aside $200 million for Everglades restoration.

This request is part of a multi-year effort to preserve one of our country's greatest natural treasures, which will also ensure that Florida Bay remains clean and vibrant for future generations.

In closing, you can count on me and my staff to work with anyone, and I truly mean that, any individual that is ready to support smart water policies, Everglades preservation and the restoration of the Florida Bay. It doesn't matter if it's a council member from Marathon or if it's the governor or the president of the United States. If they are prepared to make these issues as serious priority to all of us, then my door is open and Congress, I will do everything I can.

We need to have compromise. I will fight for funding. I'm ready to push for intergovernmental coordination and cooperation. You can count on me for that. Thank you so much.

And I truly apologize. I have another event, and I know that this was the only time that the Army Corps could make it down here. So, it was important for me to get down here.

But now I have to literally drive back all the way up to Miami for an event at 6:00 p.m., which I'm sure I'm already going to be late for. But this is important for me and like I said, reach out to my staff, count on me, you can count on [Ed.: Replaced "of" with "on."] Lieutenant Colonel, anything I can do from my end to make this work, I'm willing to do it.

Opening Statement

MS. REYNOLDS: Thank you. Okay, I'm going to try and use this other microphone because I feel like this is a really awkward place in this room. So, give me a second. Oh yes, that's better. Okay, all right.

So we have a few other elected officials that I just wanted to recognize, and then I'm going to make some opening comments and then we'll do a brief presentation to give you some contact and then we'll take the public comment, which is of course the most important part.

So, I just want to thank also Katie Atkinds here on behalf of Michelle Coldiron from Monroe County; Cheryl Meads, a new member of the Governing Board for South Florida Water Management District; Sarah Craven here on behalf of State Representative Raschein; and Michael Forster, the Vice Mayor of Islamorada and also Lea Padron, the Regional Director from the Office of Senator Rubio's Office. So, thank you.

Are there any other elected officials or representative of elected officials that I missed? Great.

We're going to get those folks an opportunity to do their public comment first, and then we'll go into the rest of the public comment period after Tim gives his presentation.

So just a few quick comments from me. First of all, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedules to come out and to provide public input into this process. This is the first part of our process of looking at the Lake Okeechobee schedule, how we manage water in the lake and the last schedule was done as a public process and has been in place since 2008.

Tim's going to talk a little bit more about the process in general, how we got to where we are and where we're going from here. But I wanted to take a moment to thank you for coming out and being part of this. It's really important. It's important for your voice to be heard. I know that many of you might be thinking, "Well why didn't you schedule a meeting for all of us up front?" and "Why do we have to convince you to have a meeting here in the Keys?"

So, when we normally do public scoping, we look at all of the affected communities. And while we clearly recognize that Florida Bay and the Florida Keys are part of the overall system, the bulk of the part of the system that we're talking about right now for the Lake Okeechobee schedule, has to do with how we're flowing water out of the lake and into the conservation areas. That's the part that this part of the process is focused on.

Obviously, it continues to flow south and many of you have been part of the process for the combined operations plan comp that we're also working on, that we've been working on for over a year and a half, and that we have -- and many of you may have participated in workshops in developing the

alternatives for how we flow that water from the water conservation areas into the park and into the Florida Bay.

And so, this process is really looking at those areas farther north, but absolutely impacts how water is made available for the southern part of the system. And so if you guys have questions about that after the meeting, I'd be happy to talk with any of you more about that or any of our staff would. But that's why we had initially not scheduled a meeting here, but we had scheduled meetings for comp here in the Keys multiple times over the last year.

But we're happy to be here and we're happy, in fact thrilled. I'm really excited that we had so much interest from this community in being part of this process and understanding because sometimes we struggle with the rest of the State understanding how connected this whole system is; and really what became really clear to us is that you guys really understand that and really want to be part of the process because you know what happens north of you, affects you.

And so, we know that too. We're glad that you're here, and I'm really looking forward to your comments.

The only other thing that I wanted to address and give a little bit of information to you publicly, is there's a lot of concern about the Corps [Ed. Changed "core" to "Corps."] drying Lake Okeechobee down to ten and a half feet. I can assure you that we have not been told to dry the lake to ten and a half feet. We have not been told to dry the lake to any particular level.

The guidance that we have been given is to look at everything that we can do to help mitigate any kind of algae blooms in any part of the system. And we are working really hard with partners all across the State, local state, federal agencies to do everything that we can to mitigate for any of the negative impacts that we've seen multiple times over the last few years. So, over the last six years, we have seen really high lake levels and we've seen big problems with blue/green algae, the red tide event that happened in the Gulf and wrapped around the State. It was a huge deal. High lake levels multiple times over sixteen feet over the last six years really impact the land of all the habitats.

And so we've been working really hard since October to figure out a strategy that would allow us to help build some resiliency and mitigate for impacts. And so that's what we've been working on all the way since October. And again, I can –- I'm happy to provide more information on that after the meeting if you'd like to talk to me about that as well.

With that, I'm going to turn it over to Tim Gysan. We have a team of core folks here and I see some of our federal partners and state partners here as well. So, the South Florida Water Management District is here. The Park is represented. I know a number of organizations and agencies here from the Keys are represented. So, thank you also for all the representatives from the agencies.

Presentation by E. Timothy Gysan, P.E., PMP

MR. GYSAN: Thank you, ma'am.

All right. So again, my name is Tim Gysan, I'm the project manager for the LOSOM efforts. As you can see from our agenda, the majority of this is public comment. And as Colonel Reynolds said, that's why we're here today, is to [Ed.: Changed "the" to "to"] hear from all of you and get your feedback on what's important to you as we move forward in this effort.

A little bit of history on the Lake and how things work. Many of you probably know the Lake is the part of the Central and Southern Florida project, which was implemented along with Herbert Hoover Dike in the early part of the 20th century in response to several devastating flooding events that happened around the Lake.

It's a very effective, flood control project that as it works now. And it is maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers as well as operated by the Corps of Engineers, as opposed to the rest of the C&S system which is a joint operation between the water management district and the Corps.

As Colonel Reynolds mentioned, the Lake is operated by a water control manual that is developed through a public process, and that is why we're here today is to initiate that public process.

What we'll be doing is reviewing Lake Okeechobee operations. This is not an update or a revision to the existing LORS 2008, which is how we currently operate the Lake. This is an entire look at how the Lake functions within the system and what's the best way to manage the Lake in today's climate. What will result is an operational plan, which will be documented in a system operating manual.

It's important to remember, this effort is not going to be recommending any new infrastructures, so there won't be any new canals or spillways, culverts that are a part of the recommendations that come out of this effort. However, what we will be doing, is looking at the existing surf infrastructure that will be coming online, things like C-43, C-44 reservoirs, the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike.

So that infrastructure will be part of what we need to look at as we develop these operations.

Why are we doing this now? There's several reasons. The first is, back when LORS 2008 was developed, there were two key points that were identified as times when we wanted to relook at the Lake schedule. Those being the completion of Herbert Hoover Dike rehabilitation and the second being the completion of C-43 and C-44, as I mentioned.

Both of those things, or all three of those things, will be happening within the next four years, making this perfect time to start looking at the Lake operations.

The other thing and equally as important is, in WRDA 2018, the Water Resources Development Act of 2018, Congress authorized the Corps to expedite a study of the Lake's schedule, to coincide with completion of the Herbert Hoover Dike rehabilitation and importantly, to look at the surf infrastructure that would be coming online in the near future.

Part of the reason for this specific authorization was to deal with some of the issues that we've been seeing over the last few years with Water Management, including the algae blooms that we saw in the estuaries this past year.

So, this is the first part of the NEPA process, this scoping meeting. So, the –- all federal agencies are required to follow the National Environmental Policy Act rules for doing any study or any effort that we undertake. And the purpose of that, is to document any impacts to the human environment.

We usually do that through two possible means, either an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement which one of those will also be part of this effort along with this system operating manual.

And again, that would document the impacts, not only to the lake, but to the surrounding areas that receive flow from the Lake.

This slide shows you kind of high-level what the overall schedule looks like. As you could see, there are multiple different phases of this effort, and we're currently in the public input and planning phase. This is about a four-year effort in total.

The first part of that effort as I said, is the public input in these scoping meetings that we are now concluding with our meeting here today.

We will follow up the scoping meeting portion as we're getting all the feedback from all of the stakeholders and public with several workshops, as well as, what you don't see up here, we're also going to be doing some informational webinars starting towards the end of April to provide more information about the system and how things work, the ecology and biology of the system. And based on a lot of the feedback that we've heard, these are things that are going to be important for everybody to understand to be able to participate in the process moving forward.

The planning workshops in May will focus more on some hands-on exercises that people can participate in to understand how the system functions, but also dialogue, two-way dialogue where you can ask specific questions on different aspects, whether it'd be operations or biology, water supply. So, it would be more of a two-way communication.

And the goal of those first round of workshops is to solicit feedback on some that on high level alternatives that we could run through screening models, come back out to show you how those things would impact not only the Lake, but the surrounding areas.

And we'll also be soliciting feedback on performance metrics, things that we should be looking at as we evaluate the operations of the Lake moving forward.

Moving forward after that, once we get into alternative evaluation, we'll come back out to present data as well as those performance metrics for feedback from all of the stakeholders. And that will be a multiyear process as we develop multiple alternatives, provide lots of information, get lots of feedback. It's probably the reason why this is a four year effort, is there's a lot of interruptive effort as we develop something, bring it back out, get feedback from all of you on the process to help us make the decision in the long-run.

The final culmination of this effort as I said, would be a system operating manual and NEPA document. That draft document will be sent out for everyone to make comments on in the April/May 2022 timeframe. And then once we have comments back on that, we'll release a final version of that report for public comment before a record decision is signed and we implement a new plan.

So as –- to take away from this slide, I know it's a lot of words. There's going to be a lot of public involvement, lots of opportunities for you to be involved throughout this process and be part of the effort in developments of the new operating manual.

As many of you know, there are multiple different stakeholder groups that count on the Lake for different things, whether it be for flood control, water supply or for recreation, for navigation, saltwater intrusion, lots of different project purposes. And not all of those purposes have the same operations, which are beneficial for them.

So as part of the education and compromise, the discussion as we go through this process, is to try to understand all of those purposes and create something that serves all of our stakeholder needs.

So, I'll be wrapping up here. But as you come up here, there are a few things as part of the scoping process that our team would find very valuable as we start building the framework for this effort. Your comments are not limited to these things, but as you are making comments, whether they be spoken or written, these are things that would be helpful for us. And those are, what issues are important to you? What study outcomes would you like to see and how would you major success at the end of this effort?

So just some things to keep in mind as you're making your comments during the scoping process. And I should've have changed the date on this. Comments are now due April the 22nd, we extended that comment period. And comments could be made not only through verbal comments today or written comments today, those can also be submitted via email through –- to lakeocomments@usace.army.mil and that will be an email address that's used throughout this effort to allow public stakeholders to provide feedback to us.

You can also provide comments via regular mail to Dr. Ann Hodgson at the address shown here.

I also wanted to point out our project website, www.saj.usace.army.mil. And at that website, throughout this process you'll be able to find updates on the project, upcoming meetings, materials from all of the meetings that we hold. We'll be getting a –-the transcripts from all of these public meetings, as well as video from these meetings soon, if you'd like to see those or read those comments as you're developing your own comments, those will be up on the website.

And again, the last thing before I turn it over to Andrew Geller for the public comment period, is that we will be having public workshops in May as well as those informational webinars in April. So, be on the lookout for those coming up here soon.

Again, thank you very much for everybody coming out here today. This is a great turnout. And this is a valuable part of the process. And again, thank you very much.

So, Andrew Geller by representing our Operations Division is going to facilitate the public comment period.

MS. REYNOLDS: Why don't we let the public use that mic and Andrew, you use the podium? I think that'll work better. Just put it on low. Yes. You can just pick it up.

Public Comments

MR. GELLER: Hi. I'd like to thank everybody also for coming out tonight. I'm going to be facilitating the comment period. This is not the –- so you'll have the ability to come up and speak through the microphone. When you come up to speak through the microphone, please state your name and any affiliation you have.

We have a court reporter here that'll take –- record all the comments. You can either speak your comments –- come up and stand. If you have comments written out, you want to submit those detailed comments, you can submit those now, or you can submit them to the email address or mail address.

We have about 22 people looking to speak tonight. If you can, limit your comments to two minutes. Lieutenant sent me a time period. You'll hear an alarm after the two minutes. We want to go through all of these comments. I want time for everybody to have –- come up here, give his comments that we can use in our evaluation of the new LOSOM, Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual.

Let me start with the public officials. If you can -- I'll announce the first person and then back-up if you can, if you're the back-up if you can move to the second row so we can go through these comments.

The first, I'd like to call up Katie Atkinds on behalf of Michelle Coldiron, Monroe County Commissioner.

MS. ATKINDS: So, my name is Katie Atkinds. Some of you probably know me. I'm here today on behalf of Michelle Coldiron who is –- unfortunately couldn't make it. She's returning from Tallahassee with other county staff who attended Florida Keys Day. It is at this annual event during legislative session where Keys representative vocalize a list of their top concerns and the help of the Florida Bay is one of many.

So, this is the Commissioner's message"

"The health and restoration of the Florida Bay are of the utmost importance to Monroe County Board of Commissioners and the municipalities of the Florida Keys.

"I advocate for the Florida Bay as a member of several water quality committees, the Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary Water Quality and Sewer Committee, its canal restoration committee –- subcommittee and the Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council have attended an Army Corps meeting to better grasp how Lake Okeechobee affects our Keys' waters, and recently spoke at the Southern Everglades and Florida Bay Restoration Agency meeting at Hawkes Kay."

That is a lot of [mumble].

"With that being said, my message has been consistent. The health of the Florida Bay is critical, particularly when it comes to fresh water. The Bay, home to one of the largest seagrass meadows in the world, along with fifteen federally protected endangered and threatened species, supports a multi-billion dollar fishing and ecotourism industry, provides thousands of jobs and attracts millions of visitors annually.

"A solution for the Bay and the entire Everglades is three pronged; involving the surge of water, water quality treatment and the conveyance of this water to where it is needed, the Florida Bay. The operation of Lake Okeechobee affects our human environment, and that it is where the health of our water begins. I appreciate this opportunity to relay the importance of Everglades restoration project and I'm confident the future of our Bay is in good hands."

Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you. Cheryl Meads, governing board member for the South Florida Water Management.

MS. MEADS: Can I come over here?

MR. GELLER: Sure.

MS. MEADS: I don't think I can hold my iPad and the microphone seated. Good afternoon. My name is Cheryl Meads and I was recently appointed by Governor Ron DeSantis to the South Florida Water Management District's Governing Board.

I'm proud to represent all of the citizens of South Florida, including the residents here at Monroe County, which is my home. I want to thank the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for all of the public meetings that they upheld together stakeholder input and –- how the Corps should manage Lake Okeechobee now and in the future as restoration projects; such as the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike are completed.

I especially want to thank the Corps for holding this meeting here in the Keys.

How Lake Okeechobee is managed has a tremendous impact on the life in the Keys. I appreciate the Corp listening to the residents of Monroe County on this issue. Water supply and environmental restoration are the two most crucial issues that Florida must address moving forward. They are in fact the top priorities of Governor DeSantis and of the South Florida Water Management District.

As a governing board member, I pledge to you that I will work with stakeholders and the Corps to complete and to maximize the benefit of projects that will restore the Everglades and open up the southern end of the Everglades system to move as much clean water as possible to restore and protect the Florida Bay.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, and I look forward to working with each and every one of you going forward.

MR. GELLER: Thank you. Michael Forster, Vice Mayor for Islamorada.

MR. FORSTER: Good afternoon everybody.

I don't have anything prepared. I just want to thank everybody for coming here, and I can speak for a lot of the other elected officials of Monroe County. They wish they were here, but a lot of them are arriving back from Tallahassee as we speak. And so again, they would like to participate, but they just were unable to.

I also want to recognize the Colonel for your leadership and the accolades that you received a month ago at -- were well deserved. You're definitely a champion for us, and we appreciate that.

The Village –- I'll speak on the Villages' behalf. We had a great relationship with the Corps. With that put, moving forward, we've been funded two consecutive years and for the small amount of money that you really actually have to give out, we're very honored to be able to have some of that money to use for water quality. And so, with that being said, I don't have anything particular about this Project.

It's the best management practices moving forward. I can only hope that the federal government doesn't cut the budget because you're only as good as your budget allows you to be. I mean, without funding, we're all in trouble. So, hopefully we find the money to do the right thing and save the Everglades and save Florida Bay; and for our future --as it were, based on economy in order –- lifestyle.

So, thank you for being our partner. Thank you for having the meeting here, and we look forward to working with you. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you. Do we have any more elected officials that would like to speak tonight? Now we can begin the comment period for the public. First starting with Captain Fred Ferreira and followed by Dale Perez.

MR. FERREIRA: Thank you for including us in this process. It means a lot. I'm not a public speaker, I'm a guide, so I'll do my best.

I received this text on –- from Academy of Florida. I received this text just about a week and a half ago: "hey Captain Fred, I wanted to let you know that we will not be coming to Islamorada this April for our annual team trip. You and the other guides are great. However, in the past two years, the fishing has declined. So, people felt even after nine years of great times fishing, we would –- should try something different. We have decided to go to Alaska.

"Many of the guides explained that this here is poor water quality is the reason you are experiencing the decline in good fishing. However, things will improve and we'll be happy to return to Islamorada. Keep me posted. Regrettably Mike."

I just wanted to share with you what that really means to us. There was a twelve group –-twelve person trip, six boats five days at $700, it's $21,000. Six boat night trips, $10,800. Gratuity is $6,360 if they're generous. The total loss to the guides is $38,160. Hotels, six nights six rooms at $400 a room, $14,400. Twelve passengers on airlines, $7,200. Vehicle rentals, four vehicles seven days, $2,520. Meals and entertainment, $4,000. Shopping approximately $1,500.

Things that I didn't include, because I really don't have any idea, losses not kept, but hotel gratuity, bait and tackle shops and the gas stations. Think of the guides, hotel workers and shop owners throughout the Florida Keys. Try to imagine the feeling of fear wondering if they will be able to sustain their way of life and continue living in the Keys. For me, that means talking to a realtor today to see if I could rent my house for a couple of months.

This is just one guide, imagine them all; that's a lot. Thank you very much and thanks for being here.

MR. GELLER: Dale Perez followed by Richard Garthwohl.

MR. PEREZ: Hello. My name is Captain Dale Perez. I'm a fishing guide. I belong to the Florida Keys Guides Association.

This is my fifty-first year as a fishing guide in the Keys. And Islamorada, Fishing Florida Bay and Everglades National Park. And I've got to tell you, over the years I have watched the decline of fish docks and the terrible conditions in Florida Bay year after year after year.

This last year is the worst I've ever seen from Crocodile Point, which is way in the eastern Bay, all the way out to the Cape, all the way to nearly Islamorada, the water was solid green, full of algae. This has got to stop. It's killing the seagrass. Our fish docks are depleted. People are not going to want to come here and go fishing anymore, the hotels, the restaurants; myself as a guide, we're losing business. We've got to do something and we've got to do something now, and we need your help please.

Please help us make this what it used to be. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Richard Garthwohl followed by Thomas Bartlett.

MR. GARTHWOHL: I'm Richard Garthwohl. I have moved to the Keys with my parents in 1958 and I have seen a drastic decline in the fishing and also the pink shrimp. We used to have a pink shrimp factory in Florida Bay, which used to coincide with the wintertime run which go through the bridges. That is no longer.

There was a collapse of the shrimp fleet in 1962. It just was not feasible for them to commercially fish for shrimp anymore, and the thing of it is, with the pink shrimp, that's our canary in the goldmine. And once a pink shrimp boat established back in, they would get our fishery to start to kick back in. You're looking at just a terrible decline and right now, bonefish are being caught in Dry Tortugas, in Marquesas Key. You never found the bonefish past –- Key. You could pull your life out looking for a bonefish in those areas. Now, they're there. Why? Because the shrimp are down there in the shrimp grounds off of Key West. And that's the only viable resource there.

And if we do not get the water straightened out, that's going to collapse. And it's just time to start. We've study, study, study. I was on the National Marine Advisory Board and we have gone through studies, having studies of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, and it's time to get moving.

We've restored the sheet flow to the Euphrates River portions, why can't we get Florida Bay restored? Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you. Thomas Bartlett, followed by Larry Fox.

MR. BARTLETT: Hello everybody, my name is Tom Bartlett. I am part of Key Marine Lab. I'm a staff scientist just up the road in Long Key. So, I guess what I could share with you today is, what we do is we help facilitate marine science research here in the Keys. We're not doing the research ourselves, but scientists from across the country come and work out of our lab.

Some of them do water quality testing, transects from up above Islamorada down to the Seven Mile Bridge. They have found that the Bay water comes out hypersaline on the bottom, even out of the reef. I can comment on that, that they can see what's going on in the bay on our reef.

So, it's not just in Florida Bay when they see that water coming out. I think what I would like to hear more about is what is meant by these processing plants that are cleaning up the water.

So, if we're going to restore the flow, what is this treatment plant? What is meant by cleaner water coming down, because what if there is an algae bloom in Lake Okeechobee and then you're just pushing it down further into you know, Florida Bay?

So, we also do water quality testing at the lab, which is basically we test what's going on over the seawall. And during the summer months, we have seen salinity up to forty parts per thousand, maybe forty-two, possibly higher with high temperature above eighty-five.

So, that's a change for us. It affects our ability to run research projects for our Bay water systems. So, that's it, but thank you for being here and I appreciate the time to make a comment.

Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Larry Fox, followed by Lisa Carruthers.

And I'm sorry if I mispronounce anybody's name.

MR. FOX: Larry Fox. I'm a resident of Big Pine for twenty years now. And a few years ago, I was hospitalized for a week because of a bacterial infection suspected to have been caused by water quality, or a lack thereof.

And I just read in today's paper that this is a very concerning matter that's present as introduced as the 2020 Project, that is cutting U.S. Army Corps Engineers budget by thirty-one percent.

And the conflict to this is also proposing $600 million to be spent on new money for lunar exploration. I think it's more important for our water quality than lunar exploration. That's all I have to say and thank you for the time and the efforts that went in to providing.

MR. GELLER: Lisa followed by Dottio Moses. Dottio Moses followed by Cindy Lewis.

MS. MOSES: Dottio Moses. I live in Key Largo. I believe that Florida Bay is my backyard. My husband has been coming to the Keys for sixty-eight years. He tells me how when he was a boy of twelve, he could fish from a rowboat right from shore and catch every species of fish and it was you know, that simple.

When I joined up with him and we started coming down here with him thirty-six years ago, we used to go out in the motorboat, you know a little bit further out shore and catch quite a bit of fish, trout, everything. We quit fishing years ago. The fish is –- are gone. They're gone up in the Upper Keys/Florida Bay area, as far as we're concerned. And so, I would like to –- that's important to me to see the quality of water come back to the Florida Bay and the wildlife to come back as well.

And the birds, the fish, the wildlife, the water quality, all back and to some kind of prior standard like it was in Everglades National Park and in Florida Bay, and that's what's important to me and I'd like to see a study to find out how to make that happen. How to dilute the right quality of water, good, clean water to restore the Bay to its previous healthy, vibrant self. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you. Cindy Lewis followed by Bruce Byrd.

MS. LEWIS: Hi everybody, I'm Cindy Lewis from the Keys Marine Lab, also a staff scientist and I would like to reiterate everything that my colleague Tom Bartlett said.

A big concern we're talking about how Lake Okeechobee and the restoring the water flow through the Everglades to Florida Bay is so important and we can't ignore the fact that how important it is to our coral reefs as all that water ends up out on our reefs.

As many of you may know, we are facing and unprecedented coral disease event that is basically destroying our entire reef system here, which is also a very important part of our livelihoods and who we are here in the Florida Keys.

So, this waterflow issue has far-reaching impacts to all of us here. And I think one of the things that we lost sight of over the last twenty years is, steadily the water quality testing that previously was done has declined to the point where we basically don't have a baseline anymore to even compare what we're doing.

So, I think that water quality testing is a very important issue, not just single spot checks, but in multiple places in all of these different basins around Florida Bay and including out on the reef, nearshore and offshore. This is all very important.

Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you very much. Bruce Byrd followed by Michael Collins.

MR. COLLINS: I'll pass, thank you.

MR. GELLER: After that, Sandra Vandusea.

MR. BYRD: Thank you for coming. As you can tell, these issues are really important to people down here. It may not be apparent I guess when you look at it, how important Lake Okeechobee is to this community.

But if you're the last stop coming south on the water supply train, which is the Florida Keys Aqueduct, having water available in a dry year is really important. You're standing in line behind Palm Beach, Broward and Dade County. We don't have that kind of --

So, it's important there be water here. If you're Florida Bay, the last stop coming south, the water coming out of Lake Okeechobee in a dry year it's critically important that that water be available.

I do not believe, after twenty years of public service, thirty-five years as a fishing guide, over forty-five years involved in those issues, there's never going to be enough reservoirs. At $2 billion a pop, we're still you know, still waiting for the money to show up to even start the planning process.

I believe that Lake is critical to the health of this community, both in terms of water supply and in terms of our dependence on Florida Bay. And I believe that to operate that system, we've invested huge money, increasing the operational capabilities to the projects to meet its project goals. You still got to have water to operate if there's no –- from the infrastructure.

I believe for the Lake is critical to providing that. I'm glad to hear the Corp is not going to drop it to ten and a half, which I believe it would be a major disaster, not only for us but for the communities that are you know, asking for relief from the discharges. There would just be more discharges.

So again, thank you for coming. I appreciate your interest in this and save us some water.

MR. GELLER: Sandra Vandusea.

MS. VANDUSEA: Pass.

MR. GELLER: Richard Trotta followed by Dr. Ross Boucek.

MR. TROTTA: My name is Richard Trotta. I work with -- Sugar. I come here because I've lived in the Florida Keys, at least part-time, for the last forty-years. I've been fishing in Flamingo probably for fifty-five years. And it's changed significantly.

But this is an interconnected system. The goal of bringing water now to ten and a half feet in the Lake has a lot of meaning for the folks to the north, of course. That's not a random number. That's actually in LORS 2008. And I think that the Corps should consider that is the bottom range of that –- of LORS 2008.

So, I hope that you consider that in your capacity.

MR. GELLER: Dr. Ross Boucek.

DR. BOUCEK [Ed.: Changed "MR." to "DR."]: Thank you all for making the time to come down here and listen to us.

So, I am a scientist for an organization called Bonefish and Tarpon Trust. Our mission is to protect and restore populations of bonefish in Tarpon and the Florida Keys. These fisheries are extremely lucrative, generating just under half a billion dollars a year in economic impact for our county.

The core of the fishery is Islamorada, Florida Bay. What makes that fishery so good there is the habitats that are available to support the fisheries, especially the seagrass. However, to support that seagrass, Florida Bay needs fresh water.

Right now, we're getting about half as much fresh water across the earth we should. But most importantly, we're getting three to six times less in the dry season. This was –- this makes the ecosystem extremely vulnerable, the catastrophic ecological change when droughts occur, like what happened in 2015.

In 2015, we got a very weird localized drought resulting in salinities in the Florida Bay to reach to upwards about double marine water, which is equivalent to what you would read in places like the Great Salt Lake. When salinities got that high, it was basically lethal to everything but frying shrimp, resulting in about overnight losses of about 50,000 acres of seagrass.

The seagrass is about a third of the seagrass in Florida Bay. When this happened, the seagrass died and began to rot, which fueled algal blooms. These algal blooms sloshed around as we heard from the fishing guides. It had a negative impact in fishery.

The bottom line is, when we lose a third of the habitat for the fish that support our economy, it's going to have a negative impact on the fishery. So, going back to your board. What issues are important to me? The fish.

What study outcomes would you want? I don't mean to even think to know how to get more water to Florida Bay, but that's what I would request. I know it's challenging.

And if I had to choose a measure of success, I would pick decrease salinities in the upper part of Florida Bay, especially in the dry season.

So, I'd like to end on this. Our organization, we're invested in making the Keys a better place, making our ecosystems a better place to support our economies. We've invested in research projects and restoration projects and partnership with the nature conserve scenes sea grant to restore sponges in Florida Bay and other places.

We've invested a considerable amount of money that occurred right before 2015 and 2016. We –-FWC was leading this. They grew the sponges and were ready outplant them into the wild. But this die-off occurred and the S algal bloom swept into our seagrass nurseries, basically killing all our investment in these sponges.

So the bottom line, we can't really invest in restoration on our end until these water issues are resolved. And with that, I appreciate your time and again, I appreciate you guys coming down.

MR. GELLER: Doug Gaston followed by Alina Davis.

MR. GASTON: Doug Gaston, Audubon, Florida. I had some prepared comments, but I want to talk to the fishermen for a minute because I'm a fisherman at heart. Audubon's focused on birds; has been involved in Everglades restoration projects for a long time. But I'm a fisherman at heart. And when I hear you guys talk about what you're going through, it breaks my heart.

I came down here from the northeast and watched the Chesapeake Bay decline, watched the Delaware Bay decline, watched the Stripers disappear. And you know, I want to see your businesses come back. I want to see the fish come back.

My first trip fishing in Florida was here in Marathon, so it's kind of ironic that I'm here on behalf of Audubon, Florida talking about these issues. And then I fished in Key West and Islamorada. And you're right, and I spent money on hotels and we got to buy all the bait and tackle and food and charter fees and all those kinds of things. And they help fuel these economies, so that's really important.

I have three quick comments to make. One is, it's amazing how interconnected these systems are. And it's important to look back at the Lake and stress a couple of things. One, lake health, right. And I think a number of people have said that so far. But it's important to have a healthy lake. And two, it's important to treat the lake like the natural ecosystem that it is.

In 2012, I think there was something like 44,000 acres of submerged aquatic vegetation. Now there's about 5,000. And that vegetation plays a key role in the ecology of the lake and it has a downstream benefits to the estuaries and other parts of the ecosystem.

The second thing I wanted to point out is, I understand that the Corps wants to look at the other infrastructure projects like C-43, C-44 and some of these other projects as they come online. But this is a really complex complicated process, and maybe that makes the process even more complicated unnecessarily. Maybe it's better to look at those projects as they come online instead of trying to factor them in, in a multiple integrated schedule.

The last thing I'll say is that one of the reasons why the Lake's submerged vegetation has suffered is because of the high levels in the Lake for the last six years. And it's important not to let the Lake get too high. So, we really want to caution not to use the Lake to store more water and to treat it like its natural ecosystem and not like a reservoir.

Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Thank you very much. Alina Davis followed by Jorge Abrey.

MS. DAVIS: Hi. My name is Alina Davis and I'm a realtor with Caldwell Banker Schmitt Real Estate Company in Islamorada.

I have lived in the Keys since my husband and I moved in 1982. First to Key Largo in Port Largo at mile marker 100. Now we live on the Bay on Plantation Key. We moved there in 1993, and I can tell you there has been serious degradation of the seagrass right off our dock.

When we moved there, there was seagrass everywhere. Now, along our jetty there is algae. Lots and lots of algae. We used to have lobsters in our jetty. We barely have lobsters. Yes, it's a lot of it because there's many more people coming down here to fish and lobster. But you don't have the juveniles. You just don't have them.

I think that the first thing that we have to deal with is, is the health of the Lake as the gentlemen from Audubon said. Without the health of the Lake, you can take all those other projects and yes, they will help, but that health of the Lake is of utmost importance.

I understand that there are pesticides that are being sprayed to get rid of certain algae and blooms and trees and other plants that are degrading the lake, but why are you doing it with poison? There's got to be another way.

I would like to urge everybody to come together to try to help the Lake recover its health. That is of utmost importance. If the water coming downstream, if we can get it downstream, then that will help all of our Florida Bay and the Atlantic. But until then, we won't have anything. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Jorge Abrey followed by David Denkert.

MR. ABREY: Hello, my name is Jorge Abrey. I'm from Dade County Fire Bureau. We encourage young –- to consistently maintain Lake Okeechobee water levels within the ecologically preferred operation of 12.5 feet under evaluation of the Lake Okeechobee regulation schedule is completed.

Recommendations should be based on real science and engineering. There are more than fifty projects in the integrated delivery system that need to be funded and completed before additional projects and land purchase are to be considered. It is important for the Army Corps to balance all projects on purposes what –- in considering new regulation schedules.

These projects are to include flood control, water supply, recreation, navigation and environmental effects to the fish and wildlife. The impact to lowering the Lake to the suggested ten and a half feet would be severe reduction in the capability to deliver water south of the Lake for any beneficial purposes, increased risk of permanently compromising fish –- sorry, freshwater supplies and wild fields due to saltwater intrusion in urban coastal areas affecting the health and safety of the communities.

There will also be water restrictions placed with negatively –- which will negatively impact a population of more than six million people in South Florida. It will also affect the wildlife endangering wildlife and endangered species survival affected as water needs to be in water conservation areas won't be met anymore.

Again, we encourage and require consider keeping the Lake at twelve and a half feet until evaluation of Lake Okeechobee regulations schedule is completed.

Congresswoman Mucarsel-Powell is here. Please reach out to her, tell her it's important to you guys. They need to hear from you. Reach out to her staff. Daniel was in the back talking. If you can't get in touch with her, talk to her staff. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: David followed by Steve Thompson –- Thomas.

MR. DENKERT: David Dankert. I'm a guide in Islamorada. To give you a little history, I've been fishing in parks since 1970, when I was fourteen years old. We could dive for lobster all over the park and catch lobster and catch shrimp. It was fun back then. I know people back in the fifties and sixties that wouldn't fish in the park in the seventies.

In any event, I watched the park decline over the years. We could catch red fish from Key Largo all the way to Flamingo. All those flats had red fish, we had snook, we had trout, mangrove snapper everywhere. We had deep-cut channels. And the creeks, Trout Creek, Davis Creek, Taylor River –- all have freshwater flowing through them throughout the year.

However, in the –- in our dry season, it was trickle, but it was still freshwater coming out of the park. All that changed over the years. We had less and less water. We had a decline in the fish. The Bay bottom is now gone, as well as mentioned, there is no seagrass anymore. We were on a life support in 2015/16 and we had a heart attack in '17 when the Hurricane hit, okay.

That destroyed the park. We lost a lot of Bay bottom. The park is deeper. The flats aren't where they used to be. They moved, okay. We had a big problem with salt and mud moving across there. It's just unbelievable. And our fishing now is come to a point where we used to fish let's say a hundred –- across the park. We're down to like fifteen areas that all the guides fish. We're on top of each other. It's starting to get heated.

I understand everybody's trying to make money, and I'm not you know about to argue with them, but it's getting tighter and tighter. And we are losing some of our customer. I –- my customers, they aren't coming down anymore. It's too hard for them to fish, okay, with their skill level. And they're going to go other places and I'm experiencing that now.

So, I'll stress the fact that we need freshwater. We need as much water as you can give us throughout the year. How you do it, I don't care, but we need it and we need it quickly because the park is actually going to die on us if –- it will never, never come back to what it was, okay.

If it came back to what it was in 1990, I'd be happy. But in 1970, you couldn't believe what it was like. I mean, the seagrass and the corals we had on the bottom. If you go out –- you go out the –- you can go out any way you want and there was just lobster everywhere. And we had shrimp and crabs coming to the bridges that Richard mentioned. I mean it was phenomenal back then.

So, please bring the freshwater back down. Try to bring it back to somewhat like it used to be, and we can all keep our jobs and we can have the tourism come back to the Keys that we need. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Steve Thomas followed by Barry Newmann.

MR. THOMAS: Good afternoon. My name is Steve Thomas. I'm retired fire rescue for twenty-five years and I'm a fishing guide in the Florida Key Fishing Guides Association for over thirty years now. Thank you very much for listening to what we have to say by being here.

Dave is a good friend of mine. I can back everything he said. I was going to repeat a lot of things that he just mentioned, but there's no need to. I have a couple key points that I want to get to. One is time.

I look at your plan is a four year plan and it's a great plan, but it's more of a study. I look at four years ago where we were, and I look at the fact of all the seagrass that's died off from four years ago to now, and where we are now. I'm afraid that that four years down the road that instead of a study, it needs to be more like we got to get going. We got to get out there. We have to get hands on and get going and not just study this stuff. Let's do it. Let's get in there and get involved and get it moving.

Because if that four years passed to where we are now, in another four years we're going to be in big trouble. So, hopefully we can do something about that.

The second thing is, how many people here have children? Yes, it's not about us, it's about our children. We just had a fishing seminar Sunday in Islamorada. We had seventy kids there. We taught them all kinds of fishing and casting and out of the boat pulling and you know, we got them off their iPad. We got them out there doing things that they want to learn like we learn, and they want to get out there and enjoy the environment.

When you see those kids get those little trophies and they're out there and they're three years old, six years old, seven years old and they want to be out there doing things out on the water, enjoy living down here, that's why we're down here, that'll want to make you work even harder.

So, just two points I want to get across. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Barry Newmann followed by Matthew Schwartz.

MR. NEWMANN: Good afternoon. My name is Barry Newmann. I live in Key Largo. And what I'm most concerned about is drinking water. If we don't have enough flow down here, we're going to have saltwater intrusion into the Biscayne Aquifer. And if that happens, it's going to reduce the quality of our water tremendously. And just don't forget, water companies don't make water. They make plastic bottles. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Matthew Schwartz followed by Alex Gilien.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Good afternoon. Matthew Schwartz. I'm actually representing the South Florida Wildlife Association. I appreciate you adding this meeting because I missed –- I was not able to get to any of the meetings in Miami and Palm Beach County.

So I did make the schlep down here today. I have been talking about these issues with the Army Corps for many, many years. We talked about this during the –- we talked about it during the planning meetings on the EAA Reservoir on the bridging over Tamiami Trail and every aspect of this project.

So I don't forget what I would like to request first of all, is we need data. We need really easy to understand data. I've asked for this before. How much water is coming into Lake Okeechobee? How much is going out by year, by location?

There's only so many inputs and so many outputs. If we can't get a handle on that, if the public can't see that, in an easy to read map/graph, it's impossible for us to get our heads around this. I've asked for this before. Because we keep seeing, okay the EAA Reservoir, not it's not being funded. But when it

was being funded, we were being told, that's going to reduce the discharge from Lake Okeechobee by sixty-three percent combined with other projects.

And it just doesn't make any sense. And first of all, that doesn't make any sense at all because no matter what you put in that lake, that reservoir, I'm calling it a lake because I kind of think of it as mini-me Lake Okeechobee. It's just dirty water from the EAA going into this new reservoir. It can only clean water as fast as it could get it through these stone treatment water areas.

We already have 57,000 acres of storm [Ed.: Replaced "stone" with "storm."] water treatment area in the EAA. The proposal was to add 6,500 acres more. That's nothing. That's not going to be a solution for the discharges at all, and I think that all right, there were groups that were overselling it. But the Army Corps is a government agency.

You can't oversell this stuff. You have to give us the information. The only way we could come up with good solutions is if we know how much is going into the Lake, where it's going, how much is going out in the Caloosahatchee, how much in the St. Lucie, how much is actually heading south?

It's impossible to understand this stuff without that data. I'm just going to repeat myself, but I say it every meeting that this subject comes up. There are solutions to this problem. It's wetlands. We have to start restoring the wetlands that once surrounded Lake Okeechobee. Not just the EAA and the 400,000 acres of sugar land. That's part of the problem.

There's two other basins, the Caloosahatchee and the St. Lucie, loaded with agriculture. North of Lake Okeechobee, two million acres. Two million acres of dense cattle, plus the septic running in. You've got about five million acres combined, surrounding Lake Okeechobee in intense agricultural and residential development, pouring nutrient from all directions.

At every opportunity, the money you're spending on these projects. And I'm going to say one more thing about that reservoir because the –- will allow the other projects that you guys build. They're water projects. They're water supply projects. And you know that, but the public keeps getting the idea that these impoundments that you're building are somehow Everglades restoration.

And you say it right in your EIS for the reservoir. This is going to provide extra water for the sugar growers. It's going to provide backup water for the residential areas. We need to stop providing water for farmers and residential areas.

I work with habitat. I used to fish a lot. I don't have time anymore. But I work with habitat and wildlife. At wildlife and habitat, just like people talking about the wildlife in Florida Bay, Biscayne Bay, they're dying. They're dying for lack of habitat. They die for lack of fresh water. They're dying for lack of food. It's just not working. The system is not working.

And you folks give out –- and I'm sorry to say this, in addition to these projects, you also have the dredge and fill permits. All the coastal development that's going in. All the interior development that's going in. The growth in this area is incredible, that's water use. That's also wasteful where it has to go somewhere.

So I would say you know, it's impossible in a few minutes to really summarize what I'm trying to get at, that we need natural restoration, people to –- the fisherman know it better than anyone. Florida Bay, Biscayne Bay are being destroyed by a lack of freshwater. We got to get the water right. Get the water

right. Produce, restore wetlands. Wetlands will clean water, hold water and convey water, and we have a solution actually for Lake Okeechobee it's called Plan 6.

You'd know that you can't do this regulation schedule without duck-tailing it with all these sur-projects. You've spent enough money over the years to restore million –- thousands of acres, hundreds of thousands of acres of wetlands surrounding Lake Okeechobee.

I think if we all pushed for those kinds of solutions, we'd be a lot better off than we are right now with decades of serve –- and Everglades restoration be behind us.

So, I'll stop there. Okay, thanks a lot.

MR. GILIEN: Hi folks. Alex Gilien, attorney with –-

First of all, I'd like to thank the Corps for coming down here and hearing the folks in this community. I think it's an important –- very important point that you know water comes from Lake Okeechobee and ends here. And so I think it's very appropriate. I'd also like to thank Congresswoman Debbie Mucarsel-Powell for pushing the Corps to have this meeting.

The Congresswoman Mucarsel-Powell sits on the subcommittee for transportation infrastructure of the water subcommittee that has oversight over the comprehensive Everglades restoration plan and CERP. So, she is going to be our go to as far as you know, oversight, fixing these problems.

I'd also like to thank the Florida Keys Guide –- Fishing Guides Association for coming out and speaking on behalf of the Bay. I talked to the -- Steve Friedman today and you know, he wanted me to convey that while they really appreciate you all getting down here, maybe in the future you could reach out to them because they're working a lot of the days and you know, if they can plan a better time to come out, that would help them. That would get more folks up here.

So, I wanted to note that. To go to the slide from today, one of the lines was, and you know I really respect and appreciate the Corps, but one of the lines was, you know, we're documenting surrounding areas that received flow from the Lake.

And so this here, this community, Florida Bay, is an area that is surrounding community that gets flow from the Lake. And so, you know one of the things it brings up is why do we have these different regulation schedules? Why is there a regulation schedule that covers the top half of this system and the bottom half of the system and acts like they're not connected?

Water that goes from the Lake ends in the Bay. But our water management stops and the starts and then stops. And so, one of my question is, why do we have multiple operation schedules? Because is that a product of law? Is that something that we have to do?

So I'd like the Corps to address you know, why we have different operation schedules? Why don't we have one master operation plan to operate the whole system? Because you know, much like putting food in my mouth, it doesn't stop in my throat. It keeps going.

So, how much water has flowed from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay for the last twenty years, that would be a question that if we can answer I think we'd all really appreciate that by year.

Florida Bay depends on the maximum flow of clean water for the health of the Bay. According to estimates, we did twenty-three less –- twenty-three times less water in the Bay in the dry season and three times less water in the Bay in the wet season in pre-drainage conditions.

The health of the Bay is synonymous with the health of the community here. And so we must take care of it. So CERP, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, has a big infrastructure plan, lots of money to try to fix all this, right? To try to get the water right. That's the line.

Well, it's really about capacity. It's about extra storage capacity. It's about the capacity to move water around, it's the capacity to drain. We're building infrastructure for the purpose of capacity.

So, in the dry season, there is capacity in the system that could move additional water from Lake Okeechobee to the Bay to improve the resilience of the Bay to improve the health of this community.

And so my question to the Corps is, can you evaluate what the maximum capacity is for –- to move water in the dry season from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay? What is the maximum capacity of the storm water treatment areas? What is the maximum amount of water that we can send with existing infrastructure?

I have a few more questions and then I'll finish up. I apologize for going over.

Please indicate the economic affects of tourism, fishing, hotels, restaurants, shops, rentals on Monroe County. Please explain how sea craft –- occurs in hypersaline conditional conditions.

As far as algae, please describe what types of algae occur in Florida Bay and why they occur.

Please indicate if seagrass laws increases the likelihood of algae blooms, alga blooms.

What are the human health impacts of these types of alga blooms in Florida Bay and the surrounding communities? How are local communities warned for these alga blooms? What government agencies are involved in these warnings? How does the Army Corps of Engineering evaluate seagrass die off in Florida Bay?

What is the trend of seagrass acreage in Florida Bay for the last fifty years by year? Drinking water, is drinking water supply in Monroe County affected by flows from Lake O? If so, how? And at what point does a lack of fresh water from Florida Bay harm the ability from Monroe County to have drinking water?

Please describe the health of pink shrimp over the last twenty years. What is the maximum capacity of all SDA stormwater treatment areas over the years? I asked that one before.

And that's it. Thank you all very much.

MR. GELLER: Gerald Ward.

MR. WARD: Good afternoon. Only a half hour before the close of the meeting. So there's lots of time for more people.

I'm Gerald Ward, a professional engineer. I have my residence in Key West across from the Lighthouse 409 Truman.

I would tell you that I have practiced since I came out of the service. So actually, six years in the service prior, dealt in Florida also in 1970. So, it's a long practice. I was born and six months before the war in Orlando.

I drove to Fort Lauderdale –- last February and pointed out that the inflow from Orlando goes to the Kissimmee chain and you had yet to fix after twenty-eight years, the upper chain of lakes element of that project that you're contractor to in the South Florida Water Management District for, which is often known as the Kissimmee River Restoration.

It's –- this last month –- this month, they actually completed all of the land acquisition. So the ball is now in the court's jurisdiction to get that project finished with the upper chain lakes, which his a mitigation of inflows to Lake Okeechobee so that you don't end up with the peaks that you have used the east and west outflows for.

It was pointed out through your scoping meetings that this meeting was really needed to address a large area of impact and the massive Florida Bay areas. We appreciate the meeting.

Monroe County starts sixty miles west of Key West. Key West is fifty miles from here. It's fifty miles up to downtown Key Largo and another twenty-five miles or so to Florida City. Then sixty miles west, southwest to Flamingo and the southwest corner of the mainland State of Florida.

So, we –- in miles, that's a quarter of a thousand miles. Palm Beach County is considered the biggest county in the State, bigger than the State of Rhode Island, but it doesn't have but forty times forty miles worth of area. We have a lot of area that may not be within state or waters because we have a three and nine mile limit. So –- but regardless, we are a big impact area.

Loggerhead Key and Tortugas need your NEPA review and evaluation. Smithsonian has a long research program. It's real interesting to look at the black water event of 18 7 circuit 1878 that occurred out at Loggerhead Key. I think you can find the U.S. Department of Interior and the National Parks Service will take you out there in one of their nice boats and put you up for your research in this project.

University of Miami has done a lot of work in the 1950s in Florida Bay. You have a tab a –- but many of those studies deal in deprived salinity characteristics of Florida Bay before we did the major project of Central and South Florida.

Now, pushing wildlife conservation commission in their instituted in St. Pete has extensive files that deal in Florida Bay. We need to have those incorporated into the NEPA process.

I pointed out last time that the paragraph seventeen –- 7-16, additional operation flexibility page 7-28 clearly said that the use of that operational flexibility was to be infrequent. And then more importantly, operational flexibility will be unique if it's used.

Well, we still have not heard from that meeting as to why you did the extensive discharges of January/February.

In closing, waterflows south or restore water flows south needs to be the –- based on science not the district engineer political decisions. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: Drusilla Fox.

MS. FOX: Drusilla Fox, Big Pine Key.

I wasn't planning to talk, but I'm sitting here listening to everyone and I'm going to go right there. What issues are important to you? Drinking water. Drinking water. Drinking water. Drinking water.

What study outcomes do you want? I want to be able to drink my water without worry. We can't do that now. So, especially as the dry season gets closer towards the end.

What measures –- what would you measure success with? Drinking water we can drink and having plenty of it and not being afraid. It comes from Lake Okeechobee. I mean, we watch the water levels regularly on the computer.

We need –- my heart goes out to all the fishermen. We need the water in Florida Bay for them. But if we don't have fresh water to drink, they aren't going to be here either. So, we need to get a handle on our drinking water.

There is a big difference between seasonal drinking water and out of season drinking water. Thank you.

MR. GELLER: That was the last card I had. Does anybody else wish to provide comments today?

MS. MEADS: Can I say one thing?

MR. GELLER: Yes.

MS. MEADS: I'm sitting in the front row crying. To the people who spoke today, I want to speak to you. The scientists that are in this room that spoke, I want to meet with you. I want you to have my phone number. I want you to call me. I want to sit down. I want to learn from you. I want to learn the history that you have.

I'm new at this. I need to know. I don't know how to get that information to you. Do you want me to give you my phone number right now? I don't know how to get my information to you, but I want to meet with you and you and you in the back, I want to talk to you Bryan. I want us to sit down. I want to talk to the fisherman. I want to talk to the scientists. I want to hear what you have to say in longer than two minutes.

So, my number's 305-509-2902. Wait, shall I give them your number Meagan?

MS. HILTON: I can get all their information.

MS. MEADS: Okay. So, after this is over –- Meagan, can you raise your hand?

So if you can meet with Meagan, if you want to speak to me, I dearly want to speak to you and set aside time for each and every one of you. So, meet with my assistant Meagan and thank you so much.

MR. GELLER: I thank everybody coming out tonight. Just remember, this is the beginning of our process. We're going to have online webinars, talking about the –- projects system, other topics. We're going to have workshops in person, sit down and –- manager, see where the water's moving.

We're also going to have other meetings to tell you what's going on, constantly keep you informed on the webpage. And any time you got –- to call the CCO office and find out what the current status is too. Okay. So you know the manager is always available also. Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yes, thanks again for everybody coming out.

If there's some topics that you guys would like to talk with us afterwards, we'll make ourselves available here for a little bit and answer any questions that you have about these or other topics.

I know it seems broke eel [Ed.: Real words unknown.] to only have two minutes. Some of our meetings have had several hundred people with comment cards and we've stayed really late into the night. We value everybody's time and we really wanted everybody to hear each other's comments as well.

So those are some of the reasons why we limit the public comment period, but we don't limit any of the comments that you'd like to give to us in writing. And if you don't write and you want to send it to us in a voice file, we actually have the technology to figure that out too.

So please, if you have more to say, we don't want you to feel like you don't have an opportunity. So we welcome your comments all the way through April 21st or 22nd? 22nd and we are right now working on workshops that we will provide some of the information that many of you are asking about.

We absolutely intend to make this as transparent of a process as we can. We don't want to hide any information from you. We want your input into everything that we're working on. So thank you for all of your comment.

I also took some notes on things to work on before we get the official transcript posted. But also everyone's comments from all of the public meetings will be available on our website as well.

Thanks again and we appreciate your time.

(Public Hearing concluded at 4:39 P.M.)

CERTIFICATE OF REPORTER

STATE OF FLORIDA
COUNTY OF MONROE

I, TYLER HENTZE, Electronic Court Reporter, do hereby certify that I was authorized to and did electronically report the Public Hearing on the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM); and that the foregoing transcript is a true record of my electronic recording.

I FURTHER CERTIFY that I am not a relative, employee, or attorney, or counsel of any of the parties, nor am I a relative or employee of any of the parties' attorney or counsel connected with the action, nor am I financially interested in the action.

DATED this 30th day of March 2019.

[signed]

Tyler Hentze, ECR

CERTIFICATE OF TRANSCRIPTIONIST

I, SARAH ALBALADEJO, do hereby certify that I transcribed the electronic recording produced by TYLER HENTZE of the scoping meeting; and that the foregoing transcript is a true transcript of said electronic recording.

I FURTHER CERTIFY that I am not a relative, employee, attorney, or counsel of any of the parties, nor am I a relative or employee of any of the parties' attorney or counsel connected with the action, nor am I financially interested in the action.

Dated this 30th day of March 2019.

[signed]

SARAH ALBALADEJO

(Ed.: Word list/index has been removed for brevity.]