



December 15, 2014

Dr. Wendy Graham
University of Florida Water Institute
570 Weil Hall
P.O. Box 116601
Gainesville, FL 32611-6601

RE: Moving Water South Study

Dr. Graham:

The Southwest Florida Watershed Council is extremely interested in your current review on the feasibility of a flow way south of Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. We realize the scope of your work is limited in that you are not collecting new data or conducting any modeling such as the impact of sea level rise on the south Florida ecosystem. However, we remain confident that a thorough review of the literature and interviews with objective, independent scientists knowledgeable on the hydrological conditions of the Lake Okeechobee watershed will point to an overwhelming need to enhance storage, treatment, and conveyance of water south of the Lake.

With Lake Okeechobee managed for flood control by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and water supply by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), there is no regulatory agency to effectively manage the lake's ecosystem and downstream rivers and coastal estuaries. However, both agencies have a responsibility to manage water for the protection of fish and wildlife along with their other purposes. For decades, the SFWMD has operated Lake Okeechobee as a reservoir for managing drainage from the Kissimmee River, surrounding towns, agricultural drainage and irrigation and urban water supply on the east coast. Back pumping from the sugar cane fields south of the lake has been stopped, which we believe is a good decision. However, a near continuous flow of pollutants including, pesticides and fertilizers such as phosphorus and nitrogen that pollute the lake and rivers flowing to the estuaries continues from many other sources. In addition, legacy nutrients and other chemicals added to the Lake is a continuing concern.

Management conflicts involving water stored in Lake Okeechobee to ensure sufficient irrigation of sugar cane fields during the dry season occur when limitations are imposed on environmental releases to the estuaries when minimum flows were necessary to retain a healthy estuary. Furthermore, water critical to estuaries during the dry season to balance salinity, is often rationed when other water users continue to get all of their needs met.

We support the widely held view that there is insufficient storage proposed in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) to alleviate the massive releases of excessively polluted water from Lake Okeechobee with adverse impacts to the coastal estuaries on the west and east coasts of south Florida. The only meaningful solution to "getting the water right" is the restoration of a flow way south to the Everglades in one form or another.

The low lying areas in the EAA caused by subsidence of the organic soils, due to decades of burning and accelerated oxidation of the underlying peat and muck, would be ideal as storage reservoirs in a flow-way that would function in the same manner as the chain of lakes in the Kissimmee River Basin. Furthermore, any pooling of water in the absence of gravitational flow to the south can be pumped to the Water Conservation Areas in the same manner that pumps redistribute water for agriculture in the EAA today.

Potential seepage from a flow-way in the EAA can be managed in a variety of different ways including the use of seepage cut off walls and seepage canals to avoid damage to the agricultural fields.

A meandering flow-way with wetland vegetation would effectively stabilize the rate of surface water flow to the south and greatly enhance the quality of water in the Everglades. A flow way of this type would also reduce harmful discharge to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers. The flow-way would function as storm water treatment areas improving the water quality of the region.

The infrastructure in the EAA such as pumps, pipes, and water conveyance network used in sugar cane production today would work just as effectively in support of a storage flow-way that would provide a desperately needed hydrological connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

The necessity for greater water storage and increased water treatment point to the importance of a flow-way in the EAA to begin the recovery efforts of our south Florida ecosystem and to ensure a balance between sustainable agriculture and the long term health of our environment, economy, and quality of life.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John R. Cassani". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a distinct loop at the end.

John R. Cassani, Chairman
Southwest Florida Watershed Council