

TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members

AGENDA ITEM 11

From: Staff

Date: September 16, 2016 Council Meeting

Subject: Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project Update

Introduction

At the July 15, 2016 meeting, staff presented a notice from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) regarding the Lake Okeechobee Watershed (LOW) Project. Council discussed the importance of the project and had questions related to the project boundaries (Exhibit 1). Since that time, Council staff has attended a public scoping meeting about this project on July 26 and a public workshop on August 31. The purpose of this item is to provide an update on the project based on what was learned at these events.

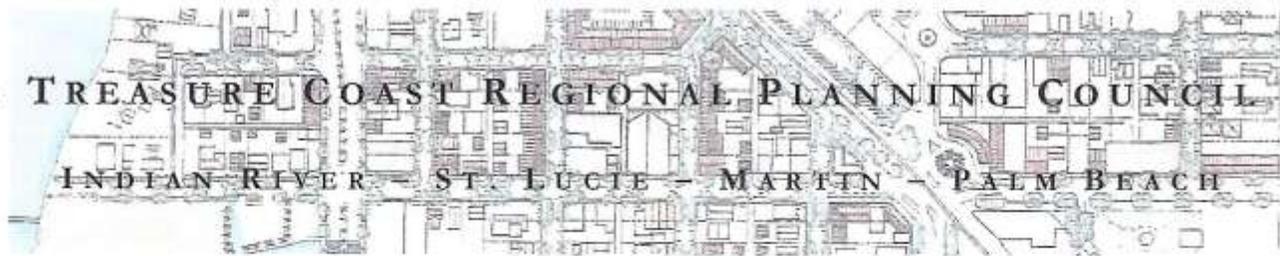
The attached handout from the Corps and South Florida Water Management District provides a concise summary of the project (Exhibit 2). The objectives of the LOW project are to improve the quality, quantity, timing, and distribution of water entering Lake Okeechobee; provide better management of lake water levels; reduce damaging releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie river estuaries; and improve system wide operational flexibility. The project team is exploring opportunities to achieve these objectives through a combination of alternatives, including reservoirs constructed on existing publicly owned lands, aquifer recharge storage and recovery wells, and wetland and floodplain restoration. The Corps and District are planning to prepare a full environmental impact statement (EIS) in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. This planning process is expected to be completed within three years.

Regarding the project area boundaries, representatives from the Corps and District have indicated they are not including the Lake Istokpoga sub-watershed at this time, because the Corps is planning a comprehensive review of the operation plans for the Lake Istokpoga basin. Also, the Upper Kissimmee, and northern portion of the Lower Kissimmee sub-watersheds are not included in the project area, because the Kissimmee River Restoration Project is still underway. Council staff will continue to monitor the LOW project and inform Council of its progress.

Recommendation

For information only.

Attachments



July 26, 2016

Gretchen Ehlinger, Ph.D.
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District
P.O. Box 4970
Jacksonville, Florida 32232-0019

Subject: Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project

Dear Dr. Ehlinger:

The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council discussed the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project at their monthly meeting on July 15, 2016. Council agreed this is an important project, especially as it relates to improving the quality, quantity, timing and distribution of water entering Lake Okeechobee; and reducing releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie River Estuaries. However, it is not clear why the project area does not include all of the sub-watersheds north and west of Lake Okeechobee. For example, the Lake Istokpoga, Upper Kissimmee, and northern portion of the Lower Kissimmee sub-watersheds are not included in the project area. Council recommends that these watersheds be included in the overall project area.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project. Council looks forward to monitoring the success of this project in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael J. Busha', is placed below the word 'Sincerely,'.

Michael J. Busha, AICP
Executive Director

cc: Michael Davis, TCRPC Chairman

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COMPREHENSIVE EVERGLADES RESTORATION PLAN (CERP) PROJECT GENERATIONS

WHAT IS CERP?

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) contains a bold outline for restoring the lifeblood of the Everglades - water - to its historic quantity, quality, timing and distribution. The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2000, the Congressional legislation that approved CERP, states that the "overarching objective of the Plan is the restoration, preservation, and protection of the south Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region, including water supply and flood protection."

The restored Everglades will not be exactly the same as the original. It will be, however, vastly superior to the current system. Although smaller than the pre-drainage system, it will be a successfully restored Everglades having recovered the biological and biological patterns that defined the original Everglades and that made it unique among the world's wetland systems.

INDICATORS OF A RESTORED EVERGLADES ECOSYSTEM

- Wetland functions that mimic pre-drainage conditions
- Significant increase in animal populations at all levels in the aquatic food chain
- Return of large nesting "waders" of wading birds
- Quality of water
- Improved health of Lake Okeechobee fishery
- Improved freshwater flow to bays and estuaries
- Improved health of seagrasses and other submerged aquatic vegetation
- Reduced frequency of water restrictions



LAKE OKEECHOBEE WATERSHED (LOW) PROJECT AND CERP

Since 2000, considerable progress has been made implementing CERP. First and second generation CERP projects are authorized by Congress and are either operational, under construction, or being designed. The Central Everglades Planning Project is currently awaiting congressional authorization. All of these CERP projects contribute significant ecological benefits to the system and the specific regional habitats in which they are located.

One of the next steps for implementation is to identify opportunities to restore the quantity, timing and distribution of flow into Lake Okeechobee. Lake Okeechobee is the heart of the South Florida ecosystem. It provides the driving water to the natural system as well as provides water support for the urban and agricultural development of south Florida.



LAKE OKEECHOBEE WATERSHED PROJECT



For Additional Information : <http://bit.ly/LakeOWatershed>

LAKE OKEECHOBEE WATERSHED (LOW) PROJECT BACKGROUND

Over time, the spatial extent of wetlands and other natural areas around Lake Okeechobee and throughout the watershed have been greatly reduced due to the conversion of natural lands to urban and agricultural uses, sea construction, and channelization for drainage. In addition to reduced habitat acreage, both natural water storage and sediment capabilities have been reduced setting off a cascade of other problems, including:

- Extreme high and low Lake Water Levels and Unstable Water Reception and Absorption Rates
- Invasive species
- Indestructible levees prevent impacting water levels and habitat in the Canal/Estuary and St. Lucie estuaries
- Wind and wave (hurricane) resuspension of sediments made worse by extreme high lake levels
- Substantial reduction in the spatial extent and functionality of wetlands and other wildlife habitat
- Degraded Water Quality and Ecology
- High nutrient levels and algal bloom
- Fluctuating water levels, including historic build-up
- High nutrient levels impact on preservation
- High nutrient water from drainage basins to the lake



LAKE OKEECHOBEE WATERSHED COMPONENTS IN CERP

Components outlined in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) that may be considered for the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project include water storage and water quality features in the sub-watershed basins located directly north of Lake Okeechobee. Essentially, the CERP plan for the Lake Okeechobee Project provided a broad, overall look at the issues and problems in the project area and recommended solutions at a conceptual level. The Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project is charged with a detailed consideration of the issues and problems affecting Lake Okeechobee and conducting in-depth planning prior to developing a recommended plan. Initial features identified which may be evaluated to improve the quantity, timing and duration of water entering Lake Okeechobee include:

- Soakles and deep ramps
- Storage, Storage and Recovery (SSR)
- Stormwater Treatment Areas
- Wetland restoration
- New Floodwater Basins

LAKE OKEECHOBEE WATERSHED PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- Improve the quality, quantity, timing and distribution of water entering Lake Okeechobee
- Reduce undesirable discharges to the Canal/Estuary and St. Lucie estuaries downstream of the lake
- Improve system-wide operational flexibility
- Restore isolated wetlands in the watershed



