

The Army Corps of Engineers Comes to the Refuge

by Sarah Ashton & Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chairs

In 2008, the Army Corps of Engineers developed the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS), which sets guidelines for water releases out of Lake O. Because LORS is currently under review, the recent meeting we had with the Army Corps was a timely opportunity for us to make the Corps aware of how LORS impacts the Refuge and the changes we would like to see.

On August 20, the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society (DDWS) hosted a luncheon as part of the Corps’ day-long fact-finding trip to this area, orchestrated by SCCF. In addition to members of DDWS, the luncheon guests included members of the Refuge’s staff, the ranking members of the Corps’ Jacksonville District, several representatives of the city of Sanibel, and the leadership of SCCF.

The schedule of water releases out of Lake O is a hot topic for several reasons. As explained in a previous [article](#), a few months ago the Army Corps began a multi-year study that will result in new, long-term guidelines for the operation of Lake O. These new guidelines are referred to as the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM). See [more](#).

This year, as we approached the rainy season, the Army Corps kept the water level in Lake O at relatively low levels. Their primary motivation was that over the last few years, tens of thousands of acres of plants in the lake have died, in part due to high water levels. These plants, which help to clean the water in the lake, need shallow water to germinate and grow. Keeping the lake low as we approach rainy season was good for the Refuge, because it reduced the likelihood that the Army Corps will have to make massive releases of nutrient rich water from the lake during the summer and early fall.

In July 2019, the Army Corps acknowledged that it had released water from Lake O into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers that contained toxic [cyanobacteria](#). In an August 2019 [press release](#), the Corps stated that to address [harmful algae blooms](#) (HABs), they are thinking about making changes to the current release schedule prior to completing LOSOM. “The proposed deviation would allow the Corps more flexibility during periods when harmful algae blooms (HABs) are present,” according to the press release. “The Corps could release less than LORS guidance when blooms are present, in exchange for releasing more than LORS guidance during times when blooms aren’t present. The goal is to release the same net amount of water as would have been released following LORS guidance, but to attempt to minimize risks posed when algal blooms are present.”

However, several groups are opposed to what the Corps has been doing and what the Corps intends to do. For example, earlier this year multiple groups complained to the Corps that the water level in the Lake was being kept at too low a level. This includes people, such as fishermen, who make their living in the Lake O area as well as those communities that rely on Lake O for either their primary or secondary source of drinking water.

These people are not the only ones unhappy with the Corps. In June 2019, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Calusa Waterkeeper and the Waterkeeper Alliance filed [suit](#) against a number of government agencies, including the Army Corps. Their suit claims that the Army Corps has failed to address human and wildlife concerns when releasing water out of Lake O. On August 1, the United States Sugar Corporation (USSC) filed a lawsuit against the Army Corps of Engineers in an attempt to reduce the flexibility that the Corps has relative to water releases out of Lake O. See [more](#).

Given the diverse set of organizations that are attempting to influence them, it is imperative that we continually communicate with the Corps. With that in mind, over the last several months DDWS has

provided input to the Army Corps, both in writing and at meetings hosted by the Corps, about how the release of nutrient rich water out of Lake O has impacts the Refuge. The luncheon was a chance for us to deliver that message face-to-face.

In case you missed it: In July the Army Corps admitted that it had released Water from Lake O that contained toxic cyanobacteria. See [more](#).