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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

What's Happening in Congress that Impacts our Water Resources?

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As discussed in [our last article](#), once COVID is behind us we will still be facing significant issues relative to our water resource. Because of that, we must continue to focus on improving the quantity and quality of our water bodies. With that goal in mind, our last article discussed why it can be very difficult to reach agreement about modifying Lake Okeechobee's release schedule. This article will focus on a key piece of Federal legislation: the [Water Resources Development Act \(WRDA\) 2020](#).

The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2020

The phrase "Water Resources Development Acts" refers to a series of public laws enacted by Congress beginning in 1974 to deal with various aspects of water resources including: environmental, structural, navigational, flood protection, and hydrology. Starting in 2014, Congress has signed WRDA bills with bipartisan support on a two-year cycle. As pointed out two years ago in a "[Ding](#)" on the Wing (DOTW) article, WRDA 2018 was important to the Refuge because it authorized the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) [Storage Reservoir](#) to be built south of Lake O.

In late July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed WRDA 2020 and, as discussed below, that bill has moved on to the Senate. In the May 28 edition of DOTW, we issued a call to action to ask for your help stop an attempt to have WRDA 2020 include language that would hijack the process that the Army Corps has set up to create the [Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual \(LOSOM\)](#). As described [here](#), that language didn't make it into the current version of WRDA 2020.

[U.S. Rep. Brian Mast](#) from Florida's 18th congressional district is actively involved in water resources issues at the federal level. According to a [recent press release](#) issued by Rep. Mast, there were several challenges to our water resources that the House version of WRDA 2020 addresses. Some of those challenges were:

A Possible Delay in Starting the EAA Storage Reservoir

As noted, WRDA 2018 gave the Army Corps permission to begin executing plans to build the EAA reservoir. However, the Army Corps decided that the project still required a new start designation, which had the potential to delay the project by a year or longer. WRDA 2020 clarifies the intent of Congress and makes it clear that a new start is not needed.

Discharges from Lake O

Discharges from Lake O into the St. Lucie and the Caloosahatchee estuaries kill plant life, harm animals, and significantly harm several other components of the environment. WRDA 2020 mandates that as part of LOSOM the Army Corps must seek to minimize discharges to the estuaries, including considering a complete prohibition on discharges from Lake O to the St. Lucie estuary.

Harmful Algal Blooms

During the summer months, Lake O is routinely covered by Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) that result from runoff from agriculture, cities, towns and other sources. When the Army Corps discharges water from the lake, these blooms are transferred to the coastal estuaries, where they cause significant economic, health, and environmental damage.

Unfortunately WRDA 2020 does not eliminate the HABs. However, one thing the bill does is to require the Army Corps to conduct research to determine the causes of HABs in Lake O and implement measures to effectively detect, prevent, treat, and eliminate these blooms. The bill also requires the Army Corps to coordinate with several federal and state agencies relative to monitoring, forecasting, and notification of cyanobacteria levels in Lake O.

Timely Completion of the C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir

Once completed, the C-43 reservoir will provide a lot of the water storage that is needed for the Caloosahatchee estuary by capturing local basin runoff and discharges from Lake O. This will reduce the quantity of discharges reaching the estuary during the wet months and provide needed water supply during the dry months. These water distribution improvements will drastically improve the ecology of the Caloosahatchee estuary and help prevent harmful algal blooms. However, as a result of outdated legislation that caps the total cost of the C-43 reservoir, the project is at risk of being delayed without action from Congress. WRDA 2020 eliminates this issue and helps to ensure the timely completion of this critical project.

Next Steps

As noted above, WRDA 2020 was passed by the U.S. House and it has moved to the U.S. Senate. The bill in its present form either eliminates or reduces some of our water resource challenges.

In the Senate, WRDA legislation is a two-part activity. As reported in a recent article, on May 6, the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works unanimously passed two bipartisan bills. One of those bills, the America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2020 (AWIA),

would authorize \$17 billion in water infrastructure projects and the other bill, the Drinking Water Infrastructure Act of 2020 (DWIA), would authorize \$2.5 billion in safe drinking water programs. This legislation is awaiting a vote on the Senate floor. We will let you know if the Senate proposes any changes that are detrimental to the Refuge.

In Case You Missed It: The recent rains have helped the ecology of Lake O. See [more](#).