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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

Important Updates and a Critical Call to Action

by Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chair

As described in this article, the threats to our water resources continue to grow, while some of the opportunities to improve those resources are within our grasp. In addition to discussing some of the threats and opportunities, this article begins with a call to action on a topic that is critical to all of us – the funding of the national wildlife refuges.

Call to Action

Over the last 15 years, annual visitors to the Refuge have increased by 66% to roughly 1 million a year. Over the same time, federal funding for the Refuge has decreased by 60%, and that has caused a 50% reduction in the Refuge's staff.

Due to decreased funding, the Visitor & Education Center is now closed on Sundays. If this decrease in funding continues, it is not difficult to imagine other cuts, such as closing Wildlife Drive for an additional day or two a week.

We urge you to write to your elected Federal officials and ask them to support increased funding for the refuge system. One easy way to do that is by clicking [here](#).

Lake Okeechobee System Operation Manual (LOSOM) Project Delivery Team (PDT)

Relative to our water resources, [LOSOM](#) is both a threat and an opportunity, because once it is finalized in late 2022, it will govern how water is released out of Lake Okeechobee – for better or for worse.

In late March, the Army Corps of Engineers held a [LOSOM PDT meeting](#). The primary goal of the meeting was to enable the various federal, state, local, and tribal organizations that are involved in the creation of LOSOM to review the results of the recently completed first iteration of modeling. That modeling evaluated 13 alternative scenarios, each of which focused on a single objective for managing Lake O, such as insuring navigation or minimizing the risk of algal blooms in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. For each scenario, thousands of simulations were run based on two widely recognized modeling tools and 52 years of data. Each simulation quantified the impact that scenario had on a variety of performance measures such as the safety of the Herbert Hoover Dike, the amount of water supply that was available, and the ability to move water south to Everglades National Park.

Unlike the first iteration, the second iteration of the modelling, which will take place over the next several months, will evaluate scenarios that include a balance of multiple objectives. In preparation for this new round of modelling, the Army Corps has announced two more LOSOM PDT technical workshops to be held on April 12 and 16. These workshops will provide the

public the opportunity to provide input on how to develop plans that balance multiple objectives for managing Lake O. See [more](#).

In [a recent article](#), we pointed out that in early March U.S. Rep. Brian Mast was advocating for the Army Corps to manage Lake O in a way that benefited the St. Lucie estuary, but which severely disadvantaged the Caloosahatchee estuary. In late March, the Lee County Commission Chair Kevin Ruane, along with the mayors of Sanibel, Fort Myers, Estero, Cape Coral, and Fort Myers Beach; and local chambers of commerce sent a letter to the Army Corps stating that our area receives relatively little benefit from Everglades restoration. Because we receive so few benefits, the authors requested that LOSOM be constructed in a way that it ensures we don't receive the majority of the adversity that results from Lake O releases. See [more](#).

Charlotte Harbor

When we discuss the threat of nutrient-laden water impacting the Refuge, we typically are talking either about water that is released out of Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee River or water that flows into the river somewhere along its 67-mile length. However, [a recent article](#) by a scientist who is familiar with Charlotte Harbor suggests that a new threat to our water resources is emerging.

“Charlotte Harbor is extremely sick,” reads the article. “Vast mats of green algae cover the bottom over expansive areas of flats and backcountry. Areas that were once seagrass are either covered by algae or are completely barren.... Charlotte Harbor’s decline is from too many nutrients: leaky septic systems, fertilizer, outdated sewage infrastructure, storm water runoff, industry effluent... the list goes on.”

The algae-infested water in Charlotte Harbor presents two threats to the Refuge. One threat is that some of this water flows down to Sanibel and adds to the possibility of another algal bloom outbreak such as the one that occurred a couple of years ago. The other threat is based on the fact that the Refuge is part of a larger complex that includes [the Island Bay NWR](#). This NWR, located in Charlotte Harbor, is directly impacted by the harbor’s deteriorating water quality. See [more](#).

Septic System Conversion

Failing septic systems are widely regarded as a major cause of excess nutrients and present a constant threat to Florida’s waterbodies. There is, however, an opportunity to reduce that threat due to the fact that Gov. Ron DeSantis’ proposed budget includes \$100 million to help defer the cost of converting septic systems to sewers. See [more](#).

Another source of optimism comes from the progress being made to reduce the number of septic systems by municipalities that are geographically close to the Refuge. Cape Coral, for example, is committed to extending its sewer system in spite of the high cost. See [more](#). Captiva, too, is showing signs that it may be willing to move away from its reliance on septic systems and to connect into Sanibel’s sewer system. However, at a February meeting, Jay Brown, president of the Captiva Community Panel stated that, “[We need] much better confirmation of what the cost of the projects are going to be, allow property owners to see where all the elements of the central

sewer program are going to be, how their individual properties are going to be effected and so forth.” See [more](#).

C-43 Water Quality

The opportunity to improve water storage exists because the governor signed Executive Order 19-12 which directs the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) to work with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to add a stormwater treatment component to the C-43 reservoir project that would improve the quality of water leaving the reservoir.

To achieve that goal, a working group was established. Its first step was to develop a summary of available, technically feasible, conventional, and innovative biological, chemical, and physical treatment technologies for water quality improvement. The group looked at technologies that could be used before the water reaches the reservoir, while the water is in the reservoir, or once the water has left the reservoir.

Originally 38 technologies were assessed, but that number was eventually reduced to 10. Each of the 10 technologies was then evaluated and ranked against a series of criteria or attributes to determine which technologies would best achieve the goal of the project. The results of that analysis can be found [here](#). In the next phase of the project, the top-ranking technologies will go through a more detailed evaluation based on factors such as cost optimization and the water quality treatment efficiencies of each technology.

On April 15, the SFWMD is conducting a public meeting to present findings of the project and to take public comment. See [more](#).

ICYMI: A bill to repeal a controversial plan to build three new toll roads (MCORES) through mostly rural and environmentally sensitive lands along Florida's west coast passed the Florida Senate. See [more](#).

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