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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

Need to Push Back Against the Army Corps

by Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chair

As I wrote in [my last article](#), the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual ([LOSOM](#)) will have a major impact on the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, when the manual is completed, because it will govern how water is released out of Lake O for the foreseeable future. As described below, at this moment, there is a high probability that LOSOM will not be favorable to the Refuge, and it may be very detrimental.

Background

The Army Corps of Engineers conducted an initial round of modeling that evaluated 13 alternative scenarios, each of which focused on a single objective for managing Lake O. The key components of each scenario were how much water should be released out of the lake, when it should be released, and where it should go.

Upon completion of the first round, the corps announced a second round of modeling and stated that it would leverage the results of the first round of modeling to create a small set of balanced scenarios that would be modified and evaluated during the second round. The corps also announced that the scenario that it determines does the best in the second round of modeling will form the basis of LOSOM.

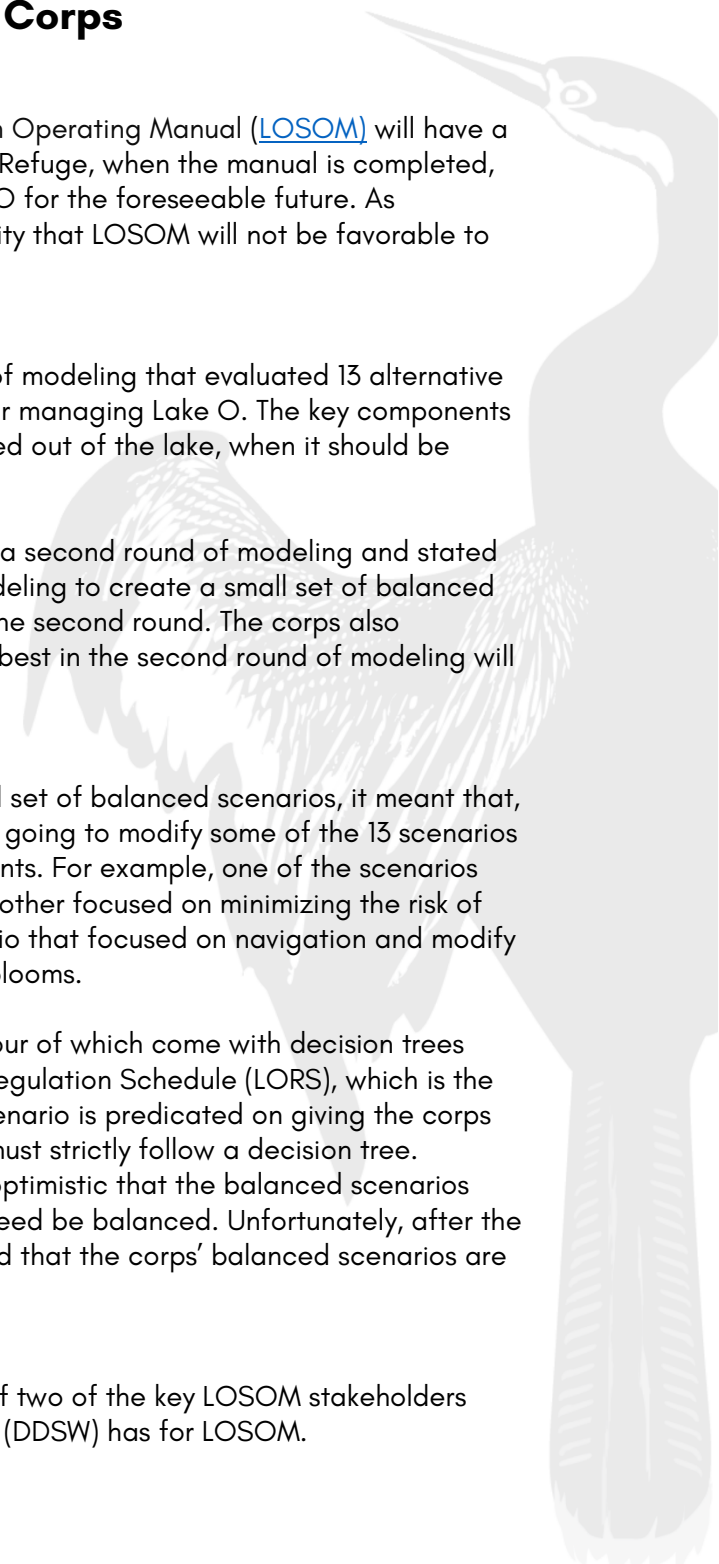
Current Situation

When the corps stated that it was going to create a small set of balanced scenarios, it meant that, based on the results of the first round of modeling, it was going to modify some of the 13 scenarios in a way that met a broader set of stakeholder requirements. For example, one of the scenarios examined in the first round focused on navigation and another focused on minimizing the risk of algal blooms. A balanced scenario might take the scenario that focused on navigation and modify it in a way so that it did a better job of minimizing algal blooms.

The corps recently announced five balanced scenarios, four of which come with decision trees similar to what currently exists in the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS), which is the current plan that is used to manage the lake. The fifth scenario is predicated on giving the corps more flexibility than what is usually possible if the corps must strictly follow a decision tree. Prior to their announcement, multiple stakeholders were optimistic that the balanced scenarios that the corps was in the process of producing would indeed be balanced. Unfortunately, after the scenarios were announced, several stakeholders indicated that the corps' balanced scenarios are anything but balanced.

Position of the Stakeholders

This section is a very simple discussion of how the goals of two of the key LOSOM stakeholders compares to the goals the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society (DDSW) has for LOSOM.



Representative Mast

Mast represents Florida's 18th congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives. He is an outspoken advocate for keeping Lake O low to avoid massive releases in the wet season, and he also wants to eliminate any releases to the St. Lucie estuary.

The Refuge's best interests are served by keeping Lake O low, but not so low that it endangers the health of the lake. Eliminating releases to the St. Lucie estuary is not something DDWS is in favor of because it would likely result in larger releases to the Caloosahatchee estuary.

Big Sugar

The phrase "Big Sugar" refers predominately to two companies: the U.S. Sugar Corporation and Florida Crystals. These companies operate in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) which is situated just south of Lake O. Big Sugar wants Lake O to be as high as possible so that the companies have all the water they need for irrigation. DDWS is opposed to keeping the lake high because that would virtually guarantee that there will have to be massive releases from the lake to avoid flooding. Massive releases were a major contributor to the blue green algae attack that devastated the Refuge in 2018.

Reaction of the Stakeholders

Representative Mast

In a recent blog, Mast stated that one of the five balanced scenarios the corps is considering was written by two lobbyists for the sugar industry and that "This is a brazen attempt to skew the plan to put corporate profits ahead of the health of Floridians across the state." He added: "We have decades worth of data that show a clear pattern: the sugar industry gets all the water they need, plus billions of gallons extra put in storage just in case, and everybody else gets a half-hearted apology from the Army Corps."

Lee County Commissioners

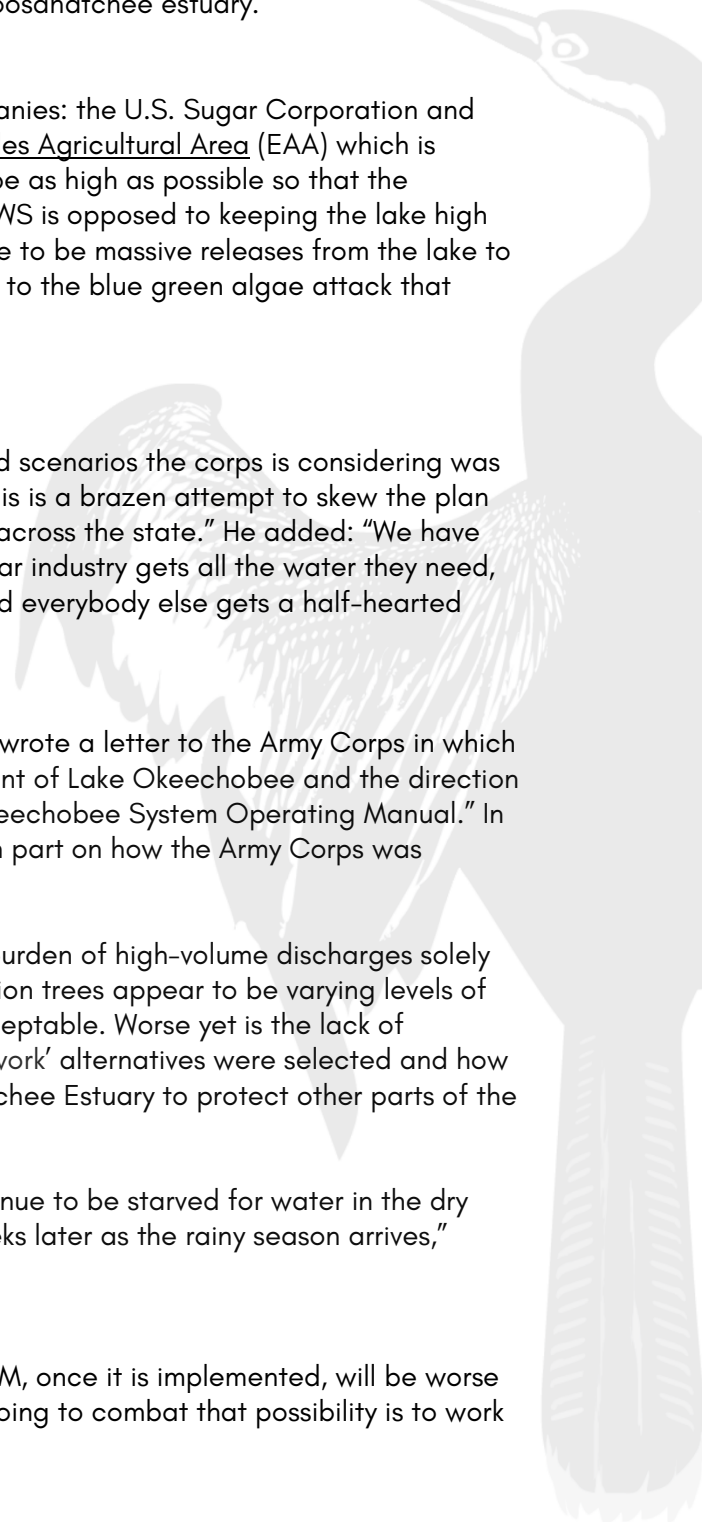
On behalf of the Lee County Commissioners, Kevin Ruane wrote a letter to the Army Corps in which he expressed his "deep concern about current management of Lake Okeechobee and the direction the Army Corps is moving in with the modeling of Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual." In the letter, Ruane blamed the 2018 algal bloom outbreak in part on how the Army Corps was managing Lake O at the time.

Ruane added that the corps' proposal "seems to put the burden of high-volume discharges solely on the Caloosahatchee. All four plans that included decision trees appear to be varying levels of devastating for the Caloosahatchee Estuary. This is unacceptable. Worse yet is the lack of transparency by your team in how these 'balanced framework' alternatives were selected and how you chose plans that unilaterally sacrifice the Caloosahatchee Estuary to protect other parts of the water management system."

Ruane's position matches that of DDWS. "We cannot continue to be starved for water in the dry season only to be deluged by high volume discharges weeks later as the rainy season arrives," Ruane concluded in his letter.

Summary and Next Steps

The way things currently stand, it is highly likely that LOSOM, once it is implemented, will be worse for the Refuge than LORS currently is. One thing we are doing to combat that possibility is to work



with our partners to send a letter to the Army Corps that lays out in detail our expectation for how the corps should evaluate scenarios in a way that is both transparent and fair to all stakeholders.

In Case You Missed It: The South Florida Water Management District is using innovative technology to combat blue-green algae in the Caloosahatchee River. See [more](#).

