November 14, 2022

Colonel James Booth
District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District
Jacksonville, FL 32207

Subject: Post-Hurricane Lake Okeechobee Management & Effect on Red Tide Conditions

Dear Colonel Booth:

We'd like to start by thanking you for your service. We recognize the incredibly difficult task that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers faces in operating the complex Lake Okeechobee water management system. We trust that you and your staff will make decisions that are equitable for all stakeholders given the dire circumstances that our communities are facing.

We are writing to you to urge that the Army Corps refrain from beginning harmful regulatory releases to the Caloosahatchee at S-79 due to the presence of red tide in the Gulf of Mexico and Pine Island Sound. We strongly urge the Corps to maintain flows at the lower end of the optimal flow range of 750 cubic feet per second to ensure our coastal waters do not receive excess nutrients that could further feed the ongoing red tide bloom.

On September 28th, Hurricane Ian devastated our coastal communities including Sanibel, Captiva, and Fort Myers Beach. The economic and environmental impacts to this area will be detrimental for years to come as we work to rebuild the businesses, homes, and lives that support a healthy tourism-based economy here in Southwest Florida.

Shortly after Hurricane Ian, a red tide bloom was detected in the Gulf of Mexico and, today, it is actively present along the southwest coast of Florida. Fishing guides and beachgoers are reporting dead baitfish, trout, and mullet in Pine Island Sound and the surrounding barrier islands. Many have canceled charters and are also reporting breathing issues. A major red tide event would be the nail in the coffin for these communities hit hardest by Ian.

Our concern is that nutrient-rich releases from Lake Okeechobee will exacerbate the present red tide bloom, like pouring fuel on a fire. We saw this scenario after Hurricane Irma in fall 2017 that led to a year-long red tide outbreak that devastated our area. Based on recent research published by scientists at the University of Florida and the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, *Nitrogen-enriched discharges from a highly managed watershed intensify* red tide (*Karenia brevis*) blooms in Southwest Florida (Medina et al. 2022), we have evidence that regulatory discharges exacerbated the 2018 red tide bloom.

Prior to Hurricane Ian, agricultural interests in the Everglades Agricultural Area were demanding water be held in the lake. This is exactly why we need to move water out of the lake during the wet season. There is nothing we could have done to mitigate what has happened thus far. Red tide is not caused by Lake O releases, but these releases and watershed runoff from Hurricane Ian will certainly fuel the intensity and duration of the present bloom.

We recognize and appreciate the priority you place upon making fair and equitable Lake Okeechobee management decisions and believe that you will make the best possible decision in this situation. Again, we urge you to abstain from harmful Lake Okeechobee releases as long as red tide is present.

On behalf of the united voice of our battered and resilient community, thank you for allowing us to be active participants in safeguarding the health of our residents, communities, economy, and delicate environment.

Sincerely,

Capt. Daniel Andrews
Co-Founder & Executive Director, Captains For Clean Water

James Evans
CEO, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation

Cc:
Drew Bartlett, Executive Director, South Florida Water Management District
Shawn Hamilton, Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Eric Sutton, Executive Director, Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission