



January 29, 2024

Melissa Nasuti
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Blvd.
Jacksonville, Florida 32207

RE: Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) Draft PIR/EIS

Dear Ms. Nasuti,

The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) has been working to advise and support restoration efforts in the Everglades for years. As island communities located at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee, we understand all too well the impacts that poor water quality has on our ecology, our economy, and our way of life. Due to recent studies from our partners at the University of Florida and our own marine lab, we now know that damaging discharges from Lake Okeechobee have the potential to exacerbate the harmful algal blooms (including red tide) that can wreak havoc on our coastal communities. Our mission at SCCF is to protect and care for Southwest Florida's coastal ecosystems, and one of the best ways we can ensure that our unique environments are cared for is to complete the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). The more clean, pollutant-free water we can send South to the Everglades, the stronger our coastal economies and environments will be. A recent study by SCCF and our partners at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida and Captains for Clean Water, demonstrated that a single harmful algal bloom event has the potential to cause over \$5 billion in economic damages and 43,000 lost jobs in our coastal communities. By working to complete the Everglades restoration projects outlined in the CERP we are making great strides in reducing the likelihood of massive harmful algal blooms. The Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) is a key part of rehydrating the Everglades and restoring the function of those ecosystems.

In order to progress on WERP, **it is essential that WERP is included in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2024.** Through this authorization, the Army Corps will be able to continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that the project proceeds as intended while protecting landowners, tribal communities and the environment. There is still work to be done, and this authorization will allow the project to move forward so that the requisite planning can occur. Rehydrating the Western Everglades is essential for the health of the system, moving water towards Florida Bay where it will help to regulate temperature and support the seagrass growth that is necessary for the robust fin fisheries that all South Floridians rely on in our tourism-based economies.

Thank you for this opportunity to voice our support for WERP and we look forward to continuing to work with you and all other stakeholders in the greater service of restoring America's Everglades.

Sincerely,

Matt DePaolis
Environmental Policy Director