



March 15, 2024

Colonel James Booth  
District Commander – Jacksonville District  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
701 San Marco Blvd.  
Jacksonville, FL 32207

RE: March Lake Okeechobee Water Releases

Dear Colonel Booth,

As we enter our third 14-day period of lake releases, stakeholders on both coasts are acutely aware of the impacts to the ecosystems where we live, work, and play. We are beginning to see signs of stress in the estuaries as salinities are held low, and the change in water clarity has been noticed by everyone. We were happy to hear that this may be the last 14-day period of full releases, and urge the Corps to stop completely, or drastically lower the volume of, the releases to protect the oyster spawn that will likely be beginning at the end of march.

With the 14-day period, we ask the Corps to structure releases in such a way to group as many days at 0 cfs together to alleviate the impact on the estuary. While much longer periods of 0 cfs are necessary to truly protect the estuary, we have seen benefits in water clarity even in the small gaps between releases. Anything that can be done to lengthen these days of zero flow would likely be beneficial.

It wasn't clear from the Corps comments what the goal will be for the next 14-day period volume of lake releases, but we ask the Corps that it is a significant drop from the 4,000cfs currently allowed by LORS-08. The nutrient filled waters being released from the lake are having an impact throughout the C-43 canal and the Caloosahatchee estuary. On March 11, a cyanobacteria bloom was reported at the Alva boat ramp. While it is not appearing to be microcystis, it is indicative of high nutrient loads in the water. Additionally, our RECON PC (phycocyanin) data is showing an upward trend in PC since the lake lowering operations began. Below is a graph demonstrating this trend. It is noted that the results here should be interpreted cautiously, as the PC does not have a lab analysis at the SCCF marine lab that is similar to an extracted chlorophyll analysis, and it is corroborated by the single discrete sample that had bloom concentrations of cyanobacteria that was collected on March 11. However, with the environmental and economic risk associated with a potential bloom, we ask that future releases be limited to lower the danger of exacerbating this trend and potentially leading to larger algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee river.

Sincerely,

Matt DePaolis  
Environmental Policy Director

