



REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
JACKSONVILLE DISTRICT CORPS OF ENGINEERS
P. O. BOX 4970
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32232-0019

OCT 12 2006

Corporate Communication Office

Mr. David Plazas
Editor
Fort Myers News Press
Post Office Box 10
Fort Myers, Florida 33902

Dear Mr. Plazas:

Please consider the following for publication as an Op Ed Letter:

As the commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District, it has been a pleasure meeting so many of you and hearing your ideas and concerns first-hand on our new Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule Study (LORSS).

Throughout my Army career, I have faced many challenges. The present situation involving the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, Lake Okeechobee and the Herbert Hoover Dike is no less difficult. Deciding on a sustainable course of action will not be easy, but I am convinced that if we continue to work diligently and together, we can prevail.

I clearly heard your insightful comments and your commitment to protect the Caloosahatchee River and the environments into which it empties. Your past concern from the effect of fresh water releases made during the unusually high 2004 and 2005 rainfall years was one of the primary reasons for the Corps' decision to reevaluate the current Water Supply Environment (WSE) regulation schedule for Lake Okeechobee.

We found that during those years, the WSE failed us because it did not provide flexibility to make discharges from Lake Okeechobee at times and in ways that would help us prevent rising levels in the lake. To discharge water from the lake in ways that would be less damaging to the estuaries and to the lake itself, the Jacksonville District had to repeatedly obtain permission from our higher headquarters to deviate from the WSE regulation schedule.

In anticipation of additional years of above average rainfall, we identified a plan to provide quick relief from the detrimental actions that WSE could impose upon us. We are taking a two-pronged approach to better manage the water resource needs of Lake Okeechobee. One prong involved performing a very quick eighteen-month study of the current WSE regulation schedule and develop a recommendation for a new schedule that provides flexibility to make better decisions. This new regulation schedule, to be implemented quickly, precluded us from making structural changes to our current flood damage reduction system. Immediate relief could not be implemented if structural changes were required.

The second prong is a long-term solution that takes into account structural changes arising from the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and Acceler8 program that begins to come on line in 2010. As new storage capacity becomes available, the schedule will be modified to use those areas and reduce the need for storing water in Lake Okeechobee and further reduce the need to discharge Lake Okeechobee water to tide.

As you know, questions about the stability of the Herbert Hoover Dike arose after the 2004-2005 hurricane seasons, and in May 2006, a state-sponsored report described the dike as being extremely vulnerable to a breach when lake water levels are high. We factored this into LORSS, because we must ensure that the health and safety of people living adjacent to the dike is protected.

I understand your concerns about the effect of factoring in the stability of the dike on our study. I listened and I began, even as early as that evening, to give guidance to my staff. They have been directed to revisit the Tentatively Selected Plan to see if further reductions can be made in the releases from the lake. Staff will continue to coordinate closely with our state and federal partners during the continued study period. We will do what is right, not what is easy, and given that, if we make more than minor revisions to the current TSP, we will, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, initiate another round of public comment.

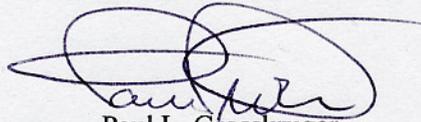
I assure you that your concerns have made an impact on our process, and you have my word that they will receive every consideration in our decisions. The following is an update of LORSS.

For many reasons, including the potential effect of forward pumps, we will wait until we receive the biological option from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before we complete our study. We are expecting to receive that opinion in mid-November and anticipate completing our final draft by the end of November. The release date will actually be determined based on the extent of public comments.

We received a request for an extension of the 45-day public comment period on the draft SEIS from the City of Sanibel, and have received a 14-day extension from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This action extended the LORSS SEIS comment period from October 2 to October 16, 2006.

Thank you again for your interest and participation in this process. For the most current information, please check our web site at www.saj.usace.army.mil.

Sincerely,



Paul L. Grosskruger
Colonel, U.S. Army
District Commander