



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
JACKSONVILLE DISTRICT CORPS OF ENGINEERS
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JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32232-0019

REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

RECORD OF DECISION

Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule Study

I have reviewed the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule Study. I have also reviewed all correspondence; comments on the Draft, Final and Errata to the EIS; views of other agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the public; and all pertinent documents for this project. Based on this review, I approve the adoption of the Lake Regulation Schedule Alternative, Water Supply and Environmental (WSE). This schedule is believed to best meet the objectives of this study. The objective is to develop and select a new regulation schedule that will optimize environmental benefits with little or no impact to the competing purposes of flood control, water supply, navigation, regional groundwater control, salinity control, enhancement of fish and wildlife, and recreational purposes. The term "regulation schedule" refers to a compilation of operating criteria, guidelines, rule curves and specifications that govern basically the storage and release functions of a water body.

Several alternatives were formulated and evaluated using input from Federal, State, and local agencies, property owners, and other interested parties before the selection of the final recommended schedule was made. The recommended alternative, WSE, incorporates increased operational flexibility in the intermediate zones and permits excess water to be discharged from the lake at lower water levels when large inflows are expected, based on current and projected hydrologic conditions. The most substantial value of the implementation of a climate-based operational schedule is to alert water managers of the increased likelihood of extreme regional hydrological events, so performance may be improved for such events. A key feature of the WSE schedule is the lower operational zone, labeled Zone D. This zone allows the operational flexibility to deliver water to the Everglades, including

the Water Conservation Areas, at lower lake levels, which minimizes adverse impacts to the lake littoral zone. Likewise, the WSE schedule allows more water to be kept in the regional hydrologic system for water supply and hydroperiod restoration just prior to and during a recognized shift towards drier climate conditions. A complete array of weekly to multi-seasonal climate outlooks is supplied by the National Climate Prediction Center. The regional hydrologic system consists of the complex network of structures, canals, rivers, estuaries, and lakes that serve the needs of developed and natural regions within the Central and Southern Florida (C&SF) Project, which extends from the Upper Kissimmee River Basin in the north to the Everglades and Florida Bay in the south. Although the WSE schedule consists of operational changes only, the C&SF Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP, formerly known as the Restudy) will include structural features that provide more substantial improvements to the lake's environmental resources.

Other alternative schedules that were considered are as follows:

1. The existing schedule, Run 25, is the no action alternative. Run 25 regulation schedule ranges from 15.65 to 16.75 feet with multiple operation zones, which vary, flood releases over a wide range before reaching maximum release rates. The purpose of this schedule is to reduce damaging flows to the nearby St. Lucie Canal and Caloosahatchee River estuaries without sacrificing the flood control or water supply benefits derived from the lake.

2. Run 22 AZE, ranges between a high of 15.6 ft. and a low of 13.5 ft. The stage ranges offer improved potential for wading bird use of Lake Okeechobee marshes while retaining other fish and wildlife values for the lake.

3. The HSM regulation schedule ranges between a high of 16.75 ft. to a low of 14.0 ft., with multiple operation zones. The theme of this schedule is to increase the operational flexibility of meeting the objectives of managing Lake Okeechobee water levels and discharges.

4. Corps 2010 is an alternative to the Run 25 (No Action) schedule for the conditions likely to occur by the year 2010. This schedule is intended to lower the lake in high water years to prevent multi-year flooding to the existing littoral zone.

The recommended schedule, WSE, is largely supported by local, State and Federal agencies and members of the public. Opponents to the schedule consists primarily of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida and other estuarine interests who are concerned about the additional loading of nutrients, primarily phosphorous, from Lake Okeechobee into the Water Conservation Areas and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee River Estuaries. Very minor negative impacts from the addition of higher nutrient lake water being discharged to the WCA's will continue until Stormwater Treatment Area 3 / 4 is completed in late 2003. There is no measurable impact to Lake Okeechobee outflow nutrient concentrations from any of the schedules. This is due to the limitations of regulation schedule adjustments and the coarseness of the modeling tools. Supporters of WSE include resource agencies responsible for managing the natural resources within the lake as well as many other Federal and State agencies and other members of the public that value the lake for its fishing, wildlife, esthetic, and recreational opportunities. Supporters of WSE include the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, (FWC) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), among others. These two agencies have observed and documented the decline in water quality, and other physical conditions within the lake that have resulted in severe degradation of fish, wildlife habitat, vegetation, littoral zone and general overall conditions within the lake. As described in the FEIS, based on documentation by FWC and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), fluctuations of lake levels result in clear environmental benefits by reducing sedimentation, helping desirable plant communities become reestablished, and improving aquatic organisms and sport fish populations.

I have considered all applicable laws, executive orders, regulations, and local government plans in evaluating the alternatives. This project was fully coordinated under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) via correspondence and informal consultation associated with the preparation of the EIS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that the project is not likely to adversely affect federally listed threatened or endangered species or result in destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. The State Historical Preservation Officer (SHPO) has stated that the proposed project is in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and the Archeological and Historic Preservation Act.

In view of the above, I find that any adverse effects of the proposed action described in the Final EIS have been avoided and/or minimized to the extent practicable, and am confident that the recommended schedule best meets the overall objectives of the project. The proposed action is consistent with all applicable laws, regulations, national policy, and administrative directives. The public interest will be served by implementing as expeditiously as possible, the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule, WSE as described in the Final EIS.

Date: 7 JULY 2000


J. RICHARD CAPKA
BG, USA
Commanding