



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
JACKSONVILLE DISTRICT CORPS OF ENGINEERS
701 San Marco Boulevard
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32207-8175

REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

Planning and Policy Division
Environmental Branch

JUN 28 2016

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

The Jacksonville District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) is beginning preparation of a National Environmental Policy Act assessment for the Lake Okeechobee Watershed (LOW) Project. The objectives of the LOW Project are to improve the quality, quantity, timing and distribution of water entering Lake Okeechobee, provide for better management of lake water levels, reduce damaging releases to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries downstream of the lake and improve system wide operational flexibility.

The Everglades ecosystem, including Lake Okeechobee, encompasses a system of diverse wetland landscapes that are hydrologically and ecologically connected across more than 200 miles from north to south and across 18,000 square miles of southern Florida. In 2000, the U.S. Congress authorized the Federal government, in partnership with the State of Florida, to embark upon a multi-decade, multi-billion dollar Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) to further protect and restore the remaining Everglades ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region. CERP involves modification of the existing network of drainage canals and levees that make up the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project.

Since 2000, much progress has been made. Construction has begun on the first generation of CERP project modifications already authorized by Congress. These include the Picayune Strand Restoration, the Indian River Lagoon South and Site 1 Impoundment projects. Congressional authorization has been received for the second generation of CERP projects, including Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands-Phase 1, the Caloosahatchee River (C-43) West Basin Storage Reservoir, and the C-111 Spreader Canal Western Project which are already under construction or are operational, and the Broward County Water Preserve Areas which is currently being designed. The Central Everglades Planning Project is currently awaiting congressional authorization. All of these CERP projects contribute significant ecological benefits to the system and the specific regional habitats in which they are located.

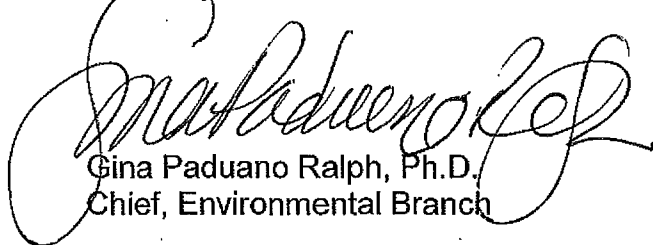
One of the next steps for implementation is to identify opportunities to restore the quantity, quality, and timing and distribution of flows into Lake Okeechobee. The LOW Project preliminary project area, where placement of features will be considered, covers a large portion of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed north of the lake (Figure 1).

Water inflows into Lake Okeechobee greatly exceed outflow capacity, thus many times there is too much water within Lake Okeechobee that needs to be released in order to ensure integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike. At other times, there may be too little water within Lake Okeechobee. Lake levels that are too high or too low, and inappropriate recession and ascension rates, can adversely affect native vegetation, and fish and wildlife species that depend upon the lake for foraging and reproduction. The volume and frequency of undesirable freshwater releases to the east and west lowers salinity in the estuaries, severely impacting oysters, sea grasses, and fish. Additionally, high nutrient levels adversely affect in-lake water quality, estuary habitat, and habitat throughout the Greater Everglades.

The Corps and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) will hold a public workshop at the Okeechobee Auditorium, 3800 NW 16th Boulevard, Suite A, Okeechobee, FL 34972 on July 26th from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm. During the workshop, Corps and SFWMD staff will describe the project and seek public comments and suggestions. The formal portion of the workshop will begin at 7:00 p.m. The LOW Project team will be available prior to and after the formal presentation to provide information and answer questions about the projects and development of a proposed plan. This is the first of a number of public workshops that will be held throughout the development and implementation of this project.

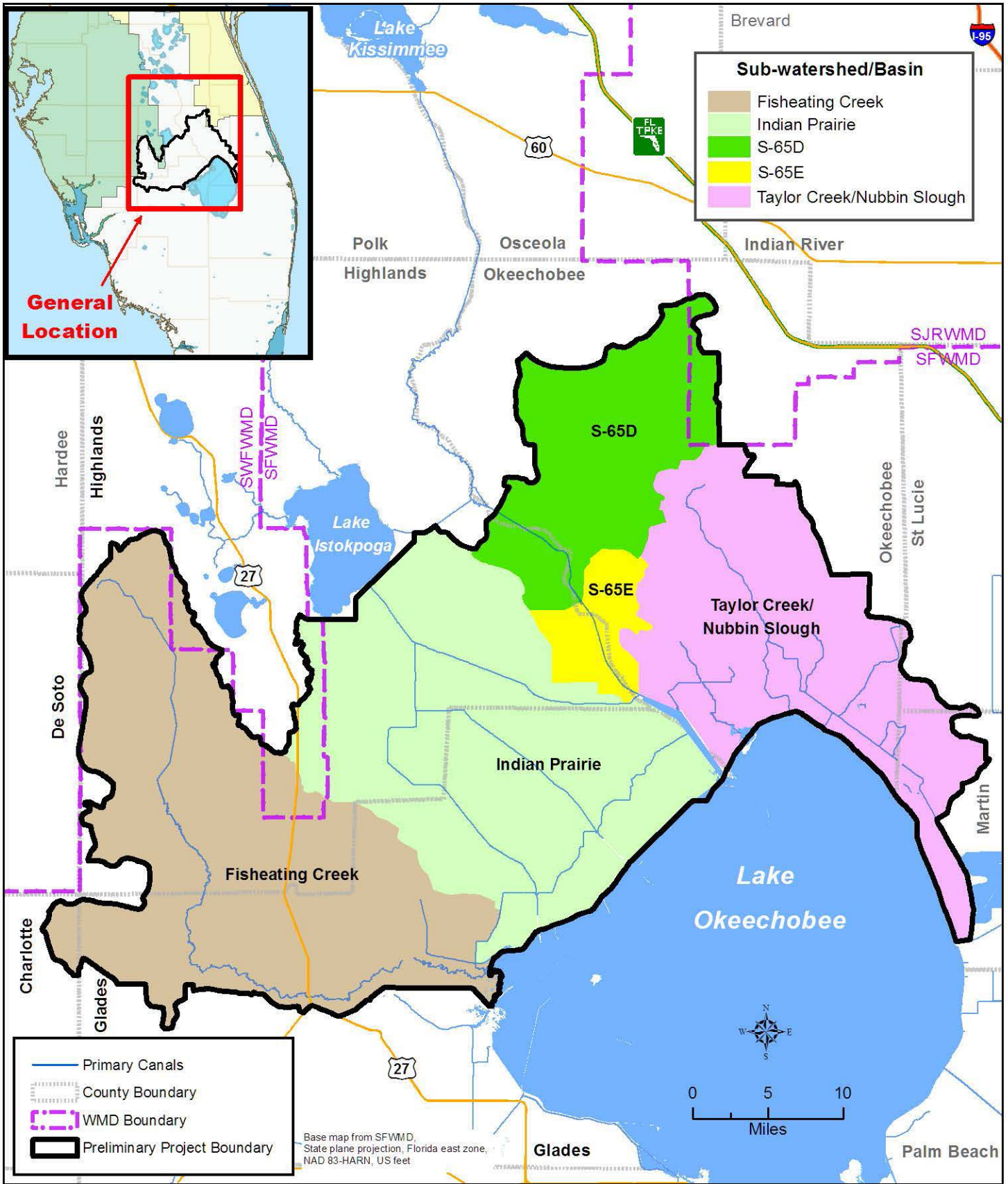
We invite the participation of Federal and State agencies, Native American Tribes, local agencies, interested parties and individuals in providing comments and identifying any issues or concerns. Please share this notice with any interested party. Send any comments you may have to the attention of Gretchen Ehlinger, Ph.D. (904-232-1862) at the letter head address or email Gretchen.S.Ehlinger@usace.army.mil no later than 30 days from the date of this letter. All individuals who respond with comments will be included in future mailings. Others may be added to the mailing list by making a written request (postcard) to the same address or by email.

Sincerely,



Gina Paduano Ralph, Ph.D.
Chief, Environmental Branch

Enclosure



South Florida Water Management District
 3301 Gun Club Rd. West Palm Beach, Florida 33406
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Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project Preliminary Project Area

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June 2016

US Army Corps of Engineers