

April 3, 2023

LTG Scott Spellmon
United States Army Corps of Engineers
441 G Street NW
Washington DC, 20226

Michael Connor
Assistant Secretary of the Army
Civil Works
108 Army Pentagon
Washington DC 20310-0108

Dear LTG Spellmon and Mr. Connor:

Congratulations on the recent ribbon cutting for the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike and the groundbreaking for the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir. The effort to create and expedite storage south of Lake Okeechobee has highlighted how the state and federal governments can work together to creatively expedite projects identified in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP).

The EAA Reservoir and stormwater treatment area (STA) are the first CERP projects to be developed under a Section 203 agreement, which has allowed expedited delivery of the STA and groundbreaking of the reservoir. As progress is made south of the Lake, the focus must now shift to northern storage. Authorization of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP), the first CERP project to create storage north of the Lake, is urgent to ensure we maintain restoration momentum and have adequate water storage throughout the system.

The undersigned groups depend on a restored Everglades ecosystem for its myriad benefits. The Everglades provides abundant wildlife and fisheries habitat for biological diversity, supports the economies of communities around Lake Okeechobee and our coastal estuaries; produces recreational opportunities for Floridians and visitors; and supplies water for south Florida agriculture and urban areas. Storage north of the Lake is critical to delivering the water at the right rate and at the right time to the Everglades so that these benefits can be realized.

In developing LOWRP, the USACE and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) initially focused on three key features: Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) wells, above-ground storage, and wetland restoration. All three components are needed to deliver the benefits identified by CERP, and the absence of these features and the buffering capacity that they provide has led to a degradation of Lake Okeechobee and the coastal Estuaries ecology as well as impacting the ability of CERP projects to meet their design goals. The LOWRP project meets two of these three important objectives – ASR storage, and wetland restoration.

ASR wells are the foundation of LOWRP. These wells will allow the year-round ability to address water quantity challenges in the system - either by storing water when Lake Okeechobee levels are too high or by providing additional water when Lake levels are too low. Thus, the wells will moderate the need for damaging water releases to the coastal estuaries when conditions are too wet and increase the Lake's ability to provide flows south when the system is too dry. The wetland restoration features will enhance the Kissimmee River Restoration project to expand floodplains, improve habitat and increase overall connectivity for biodiversity. And critically, the State of Florida is moving forward to address the need for above ground storage to complement the LOWRP.

Recognizing the ecological importance of this project, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and SFWMD have already taken important steps to expedite the delivery of LOWRP. With state funding, SFWMD has begun constructing the initial infrastructure to deliver the ASR component

of LOWRP in advance of the Final Chief's Report. SFWMD is also funding the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center to immediately begin working with the State on developing needed science for ASR implementation. Critically, SFWMD has also initiated a Section 203 process which will allow SFWMD to design above ground storage to complement the LOWRP project if authorized in the 2024 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). Together, these combined actions will expedite LOWRP and need to be swiftly executed.

As such, the undersigned groups strongly support the LOWRP and the State's Section 203 initiative and urges the USACE to:

1. Expeditiously complete the review of the SFWMD's ASR Science Plan, utilizing the significant state investment that has already been made, and submit a Final Chief's Report containing the LOWRP ASR wells and wetland features to Congress for approval in WRDA 2024.
2. Immediately execute a partnership agreement with the SFWMD to plan an above ground storage feature to work in concert with the LOWRP.
3. Ensure the LOWRP and the above-ground storage feature are delivered to Congress in a timely manner for inclusion in WRDA 2024.

The USACE and SFWMD are using innovative approaches to advancing Everglades restoration projects. With momentum for Everglades restoration greater than it has ever been, now is the time to make bold steps forward on delivering LOWRP and its complementary above ground storage component.

The undersigned appreciate your support and your partnership in delivering these important projects.

Sincerely,

American Sportfishing Association
Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.)
Boat U.S.
Bonefish & Tarpon Trust
Brunswick
Center for Sportfishing Policy
Coastal Conservation Association Florida
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Ducks Unlimited
Florida Bass Nation
Guy Harvey Foundation
International Game Fish Association
Major League Fishing
Marine Retailers Association of the Americas
National Marine Manufacturer's Association
National Professional Anglers Association
Pure Fishing
The Nature Conservancy in Florida