



444 Brickell Avenue
Suite 850
Miami, FL 33131
Tel: 305-371-6399
www.audubon.org
www.audubonoffloridanews.org

March 19, 2009

Chairman Eric Buermann
South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33146

Colonel Paul L. Grosskruger
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207

Dear Chairman Buermann and Colonel Grosskruger:

Audubon supports the request made to you by Lee County in its March 17, 2009 letter to revisit the decision to discontinue releases to the Caloosahatchee River. We believe continued releases of water are necessary to protect the health of the Caloosahatchee Estuary, and that the trade-offs are appropriate at this time.

As of March 19th, Lake Okeechobee was at 12.38 feet. This level falls in the “Beneficial Use” sub-band of the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS) 2008 schedule (the white shaded area in Figure 1) and is above the lake’s Water Shortage Management Band (water rationing line) by about 6 inches. Therefore, no water supply user is being rationed at this time. Figure 1 shows that the water rationing line is receding this time of year and predicts there is about a 90% chance that the lake’s water level would not reach the rationing line by the end of April. If the rationing level is met, rationing would likely only be needed for the final month of the dry season. One month is a relatively short period of time.

However, if the Caloosahatchee River is cut off from Lake Okeechobee releases, barring unusual rain events, the Caloosahatchee Estuary would be without fresh water for 2.5 months. This almost certainly would kill the *Valisineria* (eel grass) and other vital

vegetation and animal communities in the estuary, resulting in a multi-year recovery period. Releases to the Caloosahatchee River could continue under the LORS 2008 schedule because when the lake is in the “Beneficial Use” sub-band, the operational guidance (LORS 2008, page 77) states, “Fish and wildlife enhancement and/or water supply deliveries for environmental needs may involve conducting an environmental release from Lake Okeechobee through the South Florida Water Management District’s (SFWMD) “Adaptive Protocols” or other SFWMD authorities.”

South Florida’s wet season begins in about 75 days. If the Caloosahatchee River received an average of 600 cfs for this period, it would receive a total of about 97,500 acre-feet of water from the lake, equal to about 3 inches of lake level. This impact would be less if rains occurred or a lower delivery level was implemented.

In assessing these possibilities, the continuation of releases to the Caloosahatchee River might lower the lake level by about “3 inches,” an incremental change for lake levels. Similarly, it appears that the threat of water rationing is very low and if it did occur, it would likely be of a short duration and have a relatively small impact on growers. Conversely, immediately ceasing flows to the Caloosahatchee Estuary would lead to the complete loss of plant and associated animal communities. The estuary could take years to recover from this harm.

For these reasons, while recognizing the difficulties in assessing how to “share adversity,” Audubon requests your organizations re-assess the trade-offs in the decision to halt flows out of Lake Okeechobee and into the Caloosahatchee Estuary. As the dry season commences, the release decisions can be re-evaluated, but at this time we think releases are the best option.

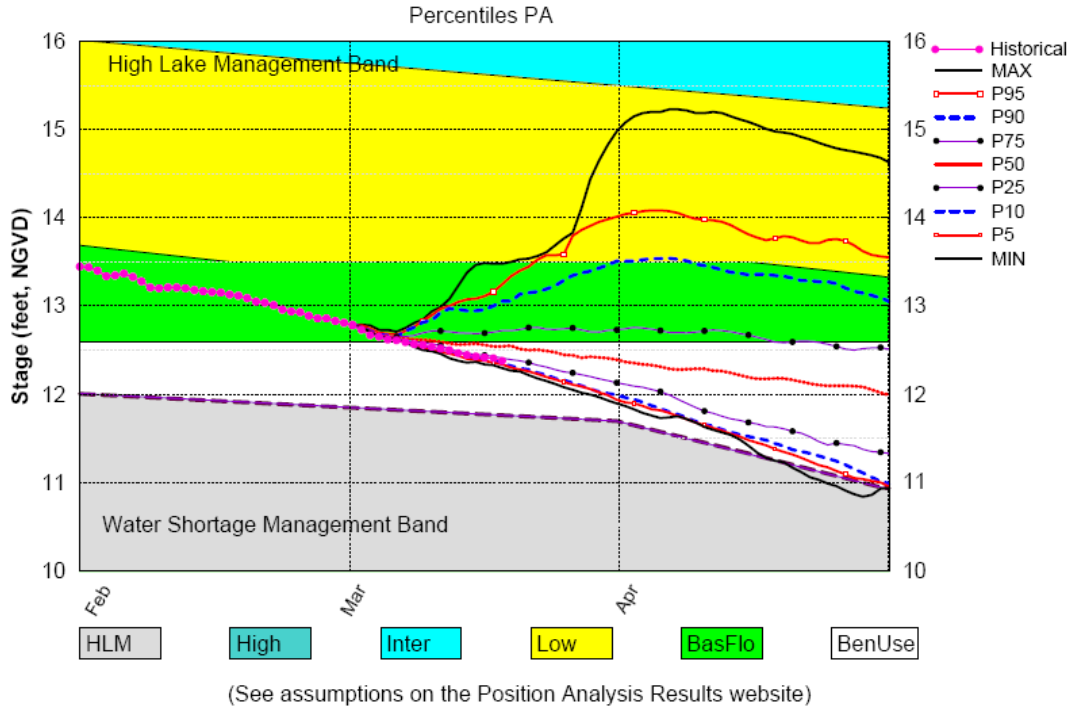
Sincerely,

Signature waived to expedite delivery

Paul N. Gray, Ph.D.
Lake Okeechobee Watershed Science Coordinator

CC: Mr. Michael Collins, SFWMD Governing Board
Mr. Charles Dauray, SFWMD Governing Board
Ms. Shannon Estenoz, SFWMD Governing Board
Mr. Paul Huck, SFWMD Governing Board
Ms. Melissa Meeker, SFWMD Governing Board
Mr. Jerry Montgomery, SFWMD Governing Board
Mr. Patrick Rooney, SFWMD Governing Board
Ms. Carol Wehle, Executive Director, SFWMD

Lake Okeechobee SFWMM March 2009 Position Analysis



Wed Mar 18 09:17:24 2009

Figure 1. This graph predicts future lake levels based on historical rainfall patterns in South Florida (from the LORS page: https://my.sfwmd.gov/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/PG_GRP_SFWMD_HESM/PORTLET_TE_CHSUMFILES/lors03162009/img_rpt/projection.pdf).

The white area, “BenUse,” stands for Beneficial Use that LORS 2008 (page 77) describes in part as, “Fish and wildlife enhancement and/or water supply deliveries for environmental needs may involve conducting an environmental release from Lake Okeechobee through the SFWMD’s “Adaptive Protocols” or other SFWMD authorities.”