

VIA EMAIL: LakeOComments@usace.army.mil

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Dr. Ann Hodgson

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District

P.O. Box 4970

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Dr. Hodgson,

I urge you to follow a science-based approach that considers multiple stakeholders during your re-evaluation of Lake Okeechobee operations, and I ask that you reject any proposal to lower the lake level to an elevation of 10.5 feet.

A suggestion made by certain persons to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) that Lake Okeechobee water levels be routinely lowered to an elevation of 10.5 feet is deeply concerning, as it will adversely impact the constituents I serve.

If the Corps were to approve this proposal, it would have potentially devastating impacts to public health and safety, Palm Beach County's economy and would likely result in irreversible damage to public water supply infrastructure and the environment.

Those individuals advocating for the reduction of the Lake's operating level to 10.5 feet hope this change will reduce harmful algal blooms and algal discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers.

The hope placed in their proposal is not supported by sound science and will likely have potentially disastrous and long-lasting consequences to Palm Beach County communities, businesses, residents and visitors.

The potential negative impacts of the proposal are as follows:

Economic damage

It is certain that the proposal would result in more frequent water shortage declarations by the South Florida Water Management District. These artificial water shortages would have a crushing economic impact on a broad cross-section of area businesses from agriculture to tourism to real estate. Creating a situation where the region is perennially in a water shortage situation would impact future development and the area's ability to attract new businesses and well-paying jobs.

At the same time, the proposal would negatively impact recreational and commercial fishing in Lake Okeechobee which would devastate small businesses such as marinas, fishing guide services and the hospitality industry.

The proposal is guaranteed to have a very serious impact on agricultural production in Palm Beach County, which is the largest producer of winter vegetables in Florida, resulting in huge financial losses,

higher prices and lower availabilities of these vegetables for all consumers, as agricultural irrigation operations rely heavily on Lake Okeechobee.

Irreversible damage to water supply

The proposal would adversely impact fresh water supplies in coastal wellfields in Southeast Florida. Saltwater intrusion is already an issue of major concern in the region due to sea level rise. Reducing water levels in Lake Okeechobee would have regional impacts as South Florida's public water supply infrastructure is dependent on higher inland freshwater levels pushing back against saltwater at the coast. Saltwater intrusion causes irreversible damage to the fresh water aquifer system and would jeopardize existing public water supply wellfields.

The proposal would be devastating for the City of West Palm Beach's water supply which depends on Lake Okeechobee water during the dry season, putting at risk water for basic human needs to more than one hundred thousand residents in the City and thousands more in the Town of Palm Beach.

During past drought years, lake levels have fallen by more than 3.5 feet to under 9 feet, multiple times since 2000 while lake levels were being managed to be at a target of 12.5 feet in June. If the lake were deliberately managed to 10.5 feet, a subsequent 3-4 foot drop in Lake levels would lead to unprecedented lows with significant regional consequences.

Destruction of sensitive ecosystems and habitat

The proposal would severely limit the ability to maintain Minimum Flows and Levels (MFLs) in the Loxahatchee River which is an impaired water body. This would do significant harm to the water resources and ecology of the area. The river requires adequate water to keep the saline coastal waters from advancing further inland and destroying its delicate ecological balance. At the same time, lowering Lake water levels would adversely impact the sensitive wetlands in Palm Beach County that depend on recharge provided by inland freshwater levels and the Lake during the dry season. Doing so would destroy habitat for fish and wildlife, including the Bald Eagle, Snail kites and wood storks.

The above adverse effects can be expected to take place should the Corps go along with the proposal.

At the same time, the proposal does little to attain its desired effect, eliminating harmful algal blooms in Martin County. The proposal could actually worsen harmful algal blooms.

Making algal blooms worse

Lowering the lake levels would dry out littoral zone vegetation and lead to increased nutrients being released into the water. Wind and wave action at lower Lake levels would also enable the resuspension of nutrient-laden sediments within the lake. Lowering lake levels would also likely result in a higher lake water temperatures. All of these factors could contribute to the growth of harmful algae.

Lastly, the proposal does nothing to address the root causes of harmful algal blooms which is nutrient laden water entering the Lake from the North, existing nutrients within the Lake as well as run off and nutrients from septic tanks along the St. Lucie River.

In light of the above, again I strongly urge you to follow science and reason and reject the proposal to lower lake levels to 10.5 feet.

Sincerely,

Gregg K. Weiss