SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

November 1, 2013

The Honorable Ben Nelson, Jr.
Mayor, City of Bonita Springs
9101 Bonita Beach Road
Bonita Springs, FL 34135

The Honorable Alan Mandel
Mayor, Town of Fort Myers Beach
2523 Estero Boulevard
Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931

The Honorable Randall Henderson Jr.
Mayor, City of Fort Myers
2200 Second Street
Fort Myers, FL 33901

The Honorable Kevin Ruane
Mayor, City of Sanibel
800 Dunlop Road
Sanibel, FL 33957

The Honorable John J. Sullivan
Mayor, City of Cape Coral
1015 Cultural Park Boulevard
Cape Coral, FL 33990

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Dear Mayors Nelson, Henderson, Sullivan, Mandel and Ruane:

Thank you for your letter regarding the water releases from Lake Okeechobee. We share your concerns and recognize the effect that large freshwater releases from the lake have on the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. The South Florida Water Management District is committed to taking steps that can minimize impacts to the fullest extent possible to the west coast communities that your five cities represent.

Your letter thoughtfully addresses operational decisions in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS). In 2007, when changes were made to the regulation schedule, the updated rules took into account the stormwater inflows from the entire Caloosahatchee watershed. Consequently, when lake levels are *below* flood control conditions, freshwater flows are measured at the Franklin Lock before fresh water is released into the estuary. The District supported this operational change in order to help reduce impacts to the Caloosahatchee Estuary.

However, when lake levels are *at* flood control conditions, the Franklin Lock is not the optimal measuring point, as this would significantly limit—if not totally halt—the Corp's ability to remove water from the lake and reduce risks to the Herbert Hoover Dike (HHD).

As you point out, reassessment of the overall regulation schedule is an opportunity to increase lake storage and provide relief to the estuaries. Since 2007, the District has supported revision of the LORS upon completion of full rehabilitation of the southern and southeastern reaches (Reaches 1, 2 and 3) of the HHD.

Reevaluating the regulation schedule as each portion of the HHD is repaired would likely be counterproductive to progress on the repair itself. A comprehensive LORS reevaluation would be an arduous process consuming significant time and resources. The District believes there is sufficient flexibility in the current LORS to find further opportunities in daily water management decisions to help the estuaries. In fact, at its October 10 meeting, the SFWMD Governing Board specifically provided direction to staff to work with the Corps in focusing on this goal.

Based on HHD construction progress, the District does support requesting the Corps to reevaluate the risk assessment of the HHD upon completion of levee and culvert work in the southeastern section (Reach 1). Reach 1 was deemed to be the section of the dike associated with greatest risk. Additionally, this section determines the current regulation bands for water management decisions. Therefore, it seems feasible that completing repairs in Reach 1 would reduce risk in the overall system and allow the Corps, under the existing LORS, to either provide additional storage in the lake and/or reduce the volume of freshwater releases to the estuaries.

As you know, both central and southern Florida experienced an abundance of rain over the summer (averaging 32 inches). To reduce impacts to South Florida's estuaries during this historic rainy season, District staff have worked tirelessly to identify sites to store excess water. The use of public land is being maximized to hold water, and partnerships with private landowners have been established for the same purpose. In addition, operational changes in the flood control system were made to send more water south into the Everglades and to tide. This was achieved by maximizing freshwater flows through key areas of existing canal infrastructure and pump stations.

Your involvement on this important and challenging issue is very much appreciated. The District looks forward to continued work with you and the residents in your five cities as well as with our state, federal and local partners to address priority water resource issues throughout the region, which includes improving water quality in the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary.

Sincerely,

Dan O'Keefe

Dan O'Keefe
Chairman
South Florida Water Management District

Cc: Rachel Cone, Deputy Chief of Staff, Executive Office of the Governor
Herschel T. Vinyard, Jr., Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Blake Guillory, Executive Director, SFWMD