

## Statement of the Problem

The coastal communities of Lee County are once again being devastated by freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee watershed. Damaging high-volume freshwater releases are impacting the ecology of our waters, the quality of life for our citizens, the strength of area businesses, and it continues to have a lasting effect on our local economy. These impacts are occurring as a direct result of inadequate water storage within the Kissimmee, Lake Okeechobee, and Caloosahatchee watersheds and the inability to effectively move water south into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.

Record rainfall throughout South Florida associated with strong El Niño conditions this winter have resulted in the stage of Lake Okeechobee approaching 16.5 feet. In an effort to protect the communities that surround Lake Okeechobee the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting high-volume regulatory releases from the Lake to the coastal estuaries, with the Caloosahatchee on the west coast and the St. Lucie on the east. For nearly a month, weekly average freshwater flows to the Caloosahatchee have been more than three times the high-flow harm threshold (~9,000 cfs) and are producing lethal conditions for oysters and other economically important fish species within the estuary. The discharges are also generating a freshwater plume that extends throughout Pine Island Sound and into the Gulf of Mexico, blanketing Lee County's beaches and coastal communities with dark, nutrient-laden water that is devastating our local tourism-based economy.

Lee County receives approximately 5 million visitors per year, generating approximately \$3 billion in economic impacts from tourism. Tourism employs 1 out of every 5 people living in Lee County. A 2013 poll by the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau indicated that 94% of all visitors to Lee County identified our beaches as our most attractive asset. Local water quality can have a tremendous influence on consumer confidence and can greatly impact tourism and our local economy.

In 2015, Lee County's taxable real estate value was \$87.3 billion. Real estate tax revenue in Lee County is estimated at more than \$300 million annually. In March 2015, the Florida Association of Realtors published a study on the "*The Impact of Water Quality on Florida's Home Values*". Their study indicated that poor water quality has a significant and direct impact on property values and Lee County's aggregate property values can decrease by as much as \$541 million as a result of poor water quality and clarity.

The freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee watershed are resulting in real impacts on our economy. To ensure that we continue to have a viable tourism industry in Lee County, it is critical that the Army Corps of Engineers, working with the South Florida Water Management District, move forward in a timely manner to implement projects and policies that will provide real short- and long-term relief from the damaging discharges.

**We request the following federal assistance:**

- Adopt a 2016 Water Resources Reform and Development Act (WRRDA) bill and authorize the funding Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP). This project will move approximately 210,000 acre-feet of water south of Lake Okeechobee and will address some of the damaging flows to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries by creating the infrastructure needed to move water south.
- Fully fund all improvements to the Herbert Hoover Dike to minimize risk of a catastrophic dike failure and impacts to the communities surrounding Lake Okeechobee and to help reduce the impacts of damaging freshwater releases to the coastal estuaries.
- Continue to support the State's request for a 90-day emergency temporary deviation from federal and state water quality criteria and restrictions that limit discharges south into Everglades National Park during extreme wet conditions and events.
- Working with the SFWMD, we request the Army Corps of Engineers accelerate implementation of the EAA (Everglades Agricultural Area) Reservoir and proceed with design, and obtain lands needed for implementation. This project would increase water storage within the system by approximately 360,000 acre-feet, providing ~20-25% of the total storage needed south of Lake Okeechobee (1.3 million acre-feet).