



February 11, 2026

Governing Board
South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33406

RE: Flows to the Caloosahatchee

Dear Governing Board,

The Caloosahatchee River and Estuary (CRE), including waters near the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River and surrounding areas, is a delicate system requiring a specific balance of both fresh and saline water. The ecosystems, wildlife and communities dependent on the CRE's health and productivity are directly impacted when this salinity regime is imbalanced.

Maintaining the ecological balance of the CRE requires a highly specific salinity envelope, derived from the mix of surrounding saline waters and fresh water from the Caloosahatchee River and watershed. Species in these ecosystems require specific salinities for their survival, foraging and reproduction. Salinity tolerances for the Eastern oyster and tape grass are used for the RECOVER 2020 metrics to determine the necessary fresh water flows the CRE must receive to maintain the health of the overall estuary. Oysters and tape grass were designated as indicator species due to the ability to extrapolate the ecosystems' health based on their status. While harm to these species alone is of concern, their degradation also signals a chain of cascading ecological impacts.

Oysters and tape grass provide critical habitat for many species, with reductions in fish and invertebrate populations as an anticipated result of stress and/ or harm to these habitats. Damage to these habitats will be felt by our local economies that are dependent on healthy ecosystems to thrive. The lack of optimum freshwater flows reduces viable habitat area for species with specific salinity tolerances, known as habitat compression. For vulnerable species such as juvenile fish this can force them to areas with higher rates of predation, decreasing population sizes, and ultimately impacting the population for years to come.

Often, high flows to the estuary garner sizeable public attention due to the nutrient pollution, water discoloration and relationship to harmful algal blooms associated with large, managed releases from Lake Okeechobee. These events are visible to the naked eye and impossible for local residents and tourists to ignore. The influx of fresh water from receiving higher than optimal flows lowers salinities to harmful levels, causing harm to key indicator species and altering ecosystem dynamics.

While the impacts of high flows present themselves clearly, a host of devastating consequences are also dealt to the CRE from a quieter, less visible threat, a lack of freshwater flows.

In recent months, the CRE has suffered the impacts of freshwater flows much lower than optimal for ecological health of the system. The optimum flow envelope for maintaining healthy salinities in this system is 750- 2,100 cubic feet per second at the S-79 structure, as clearly outlined by RECOVER 2020 metrics. When flows within this envelope are maintained, salinity tolerances for key indicator species are maintained as well. Beginning around mid-October 2025, flows at S-79 began falling below the optimum flow envelope and salinities in the CRE started to rise. That trend has continued from November through February, as we now outline this statement. As of February 11, 2026, the 14- day moving average at S-79 has been below the bottom threshold of the optimum flow envelope (750 cfs) for 108 days. Measured salinities have consistently surpassed the suitable range for tape grass in the upper estuary and for oysters

in the lower estuary. Additionally, the 30-day moving average at S-79 has fallen below the required Minimum Flow and (MFL) Level for the Caloosahatchee (457 cfs) for 78 days. Flows falling below the MFL metric, and the associated rise in salinities, cause stress and harm to species that take years to recover from. Harm to indicator species, already visible through out-of-range salinity data, represent harm to the entire ecosystem CRE system. That harm is not isolated to species within the estuary but reflects on surrounding communities and economies far into the future.

Therefore, while Lake Okeechobee remains above the water shortage management band and precipitation forecasts remain variable, we respectfully ask for supplemental lake flows to be sent through the S-79 structure to maintain the required salinities in the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. Management to boost flows at S-79 to within the 750- 2,100 cfs envelope would make a substantial difference for local ecosystems while only causing a slight difference in lake levels. While a certain amount of ecological harm has already been experienced, alterations to flows now can still have a considerable, positive impact on species and their habitat within the CRE. For the protection of the Caloosahatchee estuary's ecosystems, and the communities that directly depend on their health, we ask you to thoughtfully consider this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt DePaolis". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font.

Matt DePaolis
Environmental Policy Director