



City of Sanibel

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January 21, 2026

Colonel Brandon Bowman
Jacksonville District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207
Email: brandon.l.bowman@usace.army.mil

Drew Bartlett
Executive Director
South Florida Water Management District
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West Palm Beach, FL
Email: drew.bartlett@sfwmd.gov

RE: Lake Okeechobee Releases to the Caloosahatchee River Estuary

Dear Colonel Bowman and Director Bartlett,

On behalf of the citizens of Sanibel, we are writing to express our grave concern regarding current Lake Okeechobee operations and the insufficient freshwater releases to the Caloosahatchee River and estuary. Despite years of working in good faith with the Corps and the SFWMD to adopt the LOSOM, which was touted as a “significant shift in operational philosophy to a system-wide benefits approach” in which management of Lake Okeechobee “will be focused on making beneficial releases at times and in quantities that improve water supply availability and enhance fish and wildlife in the region”, we instead have returned to the status quo where water supply interests receive maximum benefits while natural systems like the Caloosahatchee River and estuary and Everglades National Park are subject to unnecessary and significant harm with long-term consequences.

Since early November 2025, the 14-day moving average flow at S-79 has remained below the optimum RECOVER flow envelope (750-2,100 cfs). Furthermore, the 30-day moving average at S-79 has been below the Minimum Flow and Level of 457 cfs since early December 2025. While we recognize that the C-43 Reservoir has been identified as the primary "Prevention and Recovery Strategy" to limit violations/exceedances of the MFL rule and that the District is not required to meet the MFL until the reservoir is fully operational, this in no way safeguards the natural resources of the Caloosahatchee from current, long-term, and possibly irreparable harm. In fact, salinity levels have already risen above the optimum range for tape grass (<10 psu) in the upper estuary and above the optimum range for oysters (10-25 psu) in the lower estuary. Despite these prolonged periods of harm and continued dry conditions throughout the watershed, the Corps continues to target steady releases of 350 cfs at S-79, a target that is well below both the MFL and the RECOVER range.

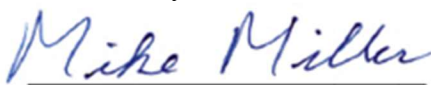
The current strategy seems to disregard the Lake Okeechobee position analysis in which there is a less than 25% chance that the Lake would enter the water shortage management band by June 1, 2026. Conversely, there is a 75% chance that the Lake is above or even well above water shortage management on the same date. Additionally, the position analysis and the NOAA precipitation forecasts reflect increasing uncertainty that below normal rainfall conditions will persist into March and April. If the late dry season turns out to have normal or above normal rainfall, it will be too late by then to undo the harm currently inflicted on the Caloosahatchee.

We urge the Corps to immediately consider a more balanced approach that delivers supplemental releases from S-77 to ensure S-79 flows remain above a targeted steady release of at least 750 cfs to maintain necessary salinity levels in the Caloosahatchee estuary. This offers the opportunity to limit harm to the Caloosahatchee now, recognizing that it may or may not be necessary to become more restrictive in the future as forecasts become more certain and conditions warrant. If cutbacks are warranted later in the dry season, the shorter duration will increase the likelihood that the natural system can withstand and recover.

Stakeholders for the Caloosahatchee, including the City of Sanibel, were in strong support of the Corps' decision to initiate recovery operations for Lake Okeechobee during the spring/summer of 2025, recognizing the health of Lake Okeechobee as one of the most critical system-wide benefits. We have also praised the SFWMD for their commitment and urgency to complete the C-43 Reservoir despite firing the lead contractor. While we recognize that both efforts will have long-term benefits for the Caloosahatchee, we strongly object to the unnecessary harm to the Caloosahatchee in the interim.

As the health of our estuary and our economy is directly tied to the water management policies administered by the US Army Corps of Engineers and the SFWMD, the City of Sanibel continues to be a willing and reasonable partner working for solutions that maximize the benefits to all stakeholders. While it's been some time since the region has experienced prolonged dry conditions and the future is uncertain, we respectfully request that the Corps provide beneficial flows to the Caloosahatchee and that the impact of any future water shortage is shared equitably across the system.

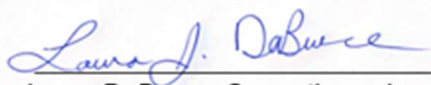
Sincerely,
Sanibel City Council



Mike Miller, Mayor



Holly D. Smith, Vice Mayor



Laura DeBruce, Councilmember



John Henshaw, Councilmember



Richard Johnson, Councilmember

CC: Dana Souza, City Manager
John Agnew, City Attorney
Scotty Lynn Kelly, City Clerk
Holly Milbrandt, Natural Resources Director
Major Cory Bell, Deputy District Commander, USACE
Chauncey Goss, Board Chairman, SFWMD
BCC: South Florida Water Management District Board of Directors