

Lake Okeechobee
Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force
Meeting Proceedings

The following individuals attended the Lake Okeechobee Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force meeting 30th May 2019 at the USACE South Florida Operations Office Clewiston, Fl.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Jon Morton
Jon Lane
Chelsea Bohaty (Phone)
Josh Bauer (Phone)
Tyler Green
Jessica Fair

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

Alyssa Jordan
Dan Roberts
Andrea Dominguez
Brendon Hession
Danielle Kirkland

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)

Robert Campbell
Linda Yarrish
Darrel Bagiotti

Other Attendees

Jason Cull, Lee County Hyacinth Control District
Colin Kewis, Lee County Hyacinth Control District
Paul Gray, Audubon
James Boggs, Helena
Linda Defee, AVC
Keith Mangus, AAM
Kurtis Ramsey, AAM
Ramon Inglesias, Roland Martin Marina
Chris Felker, Lake Okeechobee news
Philip D. Roland, Clewiston
Teronce Gardner, Clewiston
Karson Tuner, Commissioner Hendry County
Penny Taylor, Commissioner Collier County

Sherry Greco, Executive Coordinator Collier County
Dennis Lee, Lakeport
Billy Locker, Buckhead Ridge
Mary Ann Martin, Roland Martin Marina

Call to Order

Jessica Fair called the meeting to order at 10:10AM. Roll call was taken. The public comment period was announced.

The Corps of Engineers shall chair, and actively solicit participation in the Lake Okeechobee Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force. The Task Force members will represent State of Florida agencies (including the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the South Florida Water Management District), State Universities, the Corps of Engineers, and other Federal agencies. The Task Force will serve in an advisory capacity, providing multi-disciplinary technical and scientific data from which the Corps' aquatic plant management strategy, methodology, and research planning and operational efforts will evolve. The focus of the aquatic plant effort will be to benefit the overall ecological health of Lake Okeechobee.

Public Comment Period- (10:10 to 11:00am)

Avid fisherman Dennis Lee from Lakeport started off the public comment section. He is concerned about the water quality. He is a fisherman, and tour guide for many years and he "knows how to read the water." He reads a passage from the bible. He says he fished and lived on the Saint Johns River and says "there aint a blade of habitat for fish to be found." He says he's seen native vegetation sprayed. He said people used to drink the water from Lake Okeechobee. "We have dead dying fisheries." He said "people's lives are being put in jeopardy, because they are drinking this nasty water." He read a letter from 1996 by a man that guided on Lake Okeechobee. The letter was about concerns on spraying in south Florida's ecosystems. The letter said from October 1994- September to 1996, 1,786 gallons of 2-4D was sprayed. He asked if that herbicide was outlaws and the agencies replied with "no." Dennis continued reading the letter and said 7,367 of diquate was also used. Dennis is concerned about the amount of chemical we have placed in our water systems over the years. In the two year period 22,603 acres of floating vegetation was killed and deposited 7,991 tons of dead material on the lake bottom. "This greatly affects the taste of the water; and it also effects fish and the food chains." He continues with how much nutrients in put in the system and how it affects algae blooms. He said "It's all directly related to chemical assaulting of the state of Florida's water ways, state wide." He said we will need more vegetation to soak up this nutrients. Jessica then had to interrupt Dennis to allow other people a chance to speak during the time allotted. Roland Marin was next and said that he's been "fighting this thing since 1974." He agreed with Dennis comments. He said he when SFWMD was running the spraying there was 4 boats and when the corps had the spraying there was 2 boats. He said "the corps mission was to keep the waterways clear." He said it all started to happen 25 years ago. "Now you've got 20 boats spraying." "You've literally ruined the bedding areas." Roland wants to know how the spraying went from spraying only the water ways to spraying the entire lake. "you are absolutely killing the lake." Billy Locker from Buckhead ridge was next to speak during the public comment period. He said all the shallow

water areas from the pasture going in towards the edges of the lake which is about 4 inches of water now is littered with dead decaying black matter. He said “although we found some sort of fish beds, I think they were ‘what we call Nile perch.’” He continues with “We didn’t see any shell cracker beds or brim beds from okeetanie trough the pass area, new pierce canal old piece canal and all the way to tin house and Indian prairie.” He was concerned about the color and quality of the water. “We did not see any invasive plants.” Billy also would like to know what happened to the tag groups where the public can be more involved.” He agrees with Dennis and Roland that it used to be control of plants in the waterways and now has “spread out all over the lake.” He said back in the day you rarely saw SFWMD spraying on the lake. “The debate is not about whether it’s got to be done it’s how it’s being done.” He wants to know about the coordination between fwc and the corps to off load the plants from harvesting on the dike. Ramon said “there was in issue with water level.” He also wants to know “why is fwc dealing with 90 acres.” He was referring to the treatment plan up in Eagle bay. He wants to fwc stop spraying during waterfowl season and wants them to implement harvesting. Finally he wants to know what a being has done with the contracts the sprayers have and if its “man hours plus material.” Jon Lane said he could help him with some concerns he had. Jon explained that in the 90’s there was a lot less vegetation because of the water levels and there was a different water regulation schedule. Jon states “back then we had edges, we didn’t have complex vegetative mosaic that we have right now.” Dennis interrupted stating that everything is “all dead.” Jon continues to explain the edging of the hyacinth and how it was easier to spay back then. “I was here.” Jon states. In 2000 the lake was lowered to the WSE regulation schedule. Now we are under LORES since 2007. Jon explains “when you have a lower lake level average, you have more emergent vegetation coming up, and the marsh area is opening up.” He continues to explain how the vegetation causes more areas for invasive plants to grow unlike in the 90s when there was more of an edge. “this causes a lot more difficulty to treat them.” Billy Locker agrees and remembers the high water events. Jon explains these high water events were from the water regulation schedule at that time period. Jessica then asks Commissioner Taylor to present their presentation on “A Tale of Two Lakes.” This presentation is attached and compares Lake Trafford rehabilitation success story to Lake Okeechobee’s current situation. The presentation was to show that some of the projects on Lake Trafford could potentially be used on Lake Okeechobee. Commissioner Turner from Hendry County added to the presentation. He explains how the nutrient load and muck is a problem. He said “This is a concerted effort with SFWMD, DEP, and Corps of Engineers to put our heads together.” Tuner would like to see dredging in the lake. Tuner also wanted to ask a few question, including if there was an active biologist or biologists on the lake. Jessica replied that she is one of those biologists and that there is a handful of them in the room. He asked how many times she is out on the water and she replied “about two times a week weather depending.” He then wanted to know if there were interns working under our program. She replied that the Corps works with UF and USDA but there are no interns in the program. Commissioner Turner said he was not sure of how payments are broken down by spraying and harvesting but said “we as a state are lawfully missing the mark on providing those resources from a financial standpoint.” He would like to see more scientist doing research on Lake Okeechobee. “we are missing the boat from the science standpoint.” Turner would like to see some pilot programs, such as shallow water dredging being done on the lake. The public comment section was closed and the agency meeting began.

Scientific paper

This short portion of the meeting is to introduce one scientific paper that discusses relevant scientific information in order to provide valuable knowledge to the agency's and the public. The scientific paper discussed this meeting was from Karl E. Havens, Donald Fox, Steven Gornak, and Charles Hanlon, Aquatic vegetation and largemouth bass population responses to water-level variations in Lake Okeechobee, Florida (USA) 2005.

This paper was related back to the lakes current low level situation in expectations that the low lake levels will support the increase in growth of native vegetation and help clear water quality.

Interagency Flight Report

Brendon Hession from FWC gave the interagency flight report update. He reported that in March 22nd the average floating aquatic vegetation was 720 acres. He mentioned that the averages could have been lower than what is actually out there since views were obstructed and some plants were difficult to see. On April 24th there were 1460 acres of floating aquatic plants recorded. He brings back data from the past February where there was only 300 acres on the lake and mentioned "there was a gradual expansion of these plants." Brendon mention that the low water levels are helping remove some of these plants including an area in Cochran's pass and Indian prairie. The majority of the plants can be found in Halifax banks where there is a large area of hyacinth. However, low water levels in addition to contracting has helped reduce those acreages.

Danielle Kirkland answered some of the stakeholder's questions that were addressed during the public comment period. "Why did you let the plants get that bad?" Danielle explains that after the pass the first thing they looked into was "where can we start harvesting." FWC wants to implement harvesting pilot projects however, the low water levels has made that difficult. Danielle said FWC is trying to be as transparent as possible. They are having staff monitor areas that are displacing native vegetation and making treatments plans for those areas. They are sending out the treatment plans and discussing with the stakeholders these issues. "We are committed, when water levels allow, to continue to look for areas to harvest." Billy Locker mentioned that he liked the reports being set out and said "that was a big plus." The disposal sites for harvesting were a concern. Danielle mentions they are also looking into that "that's what drives the cost up." They are still looking to integrate harvesting and work with the price per acre. A harvesting project will be starting in the Kissimmee chain June 1st harvesting hydrilla. The cost per acre is \$2800. On Lake Okeechobee water levels are still too low however biologist are out surveying areas to find suitable sites for harvesting. Jon Lane mentions the Corps is working with FWC to conduct harvesting projects and currently new low water harvesting projects are being looked into. Roland Martin is concerned about how the lake has been increased to an average of 15-17ft and "absolutely tried our best to ruin the lake." Jon suggests that the public go to the new Lake Okeechobee regulation schedule to ask for lower lake levels.

Position analysis

<https://www.sfwmd.gov/sites/default/files/documents/projection.pdf>

FWC

Brendon Hession updated the agency on the treatments happening on the lake. Aquatic vegetation control is down in the southern end of the lake between Halifax and pelican bay. AVC

has treated 440 acres of floating plants in that area from the start of the month. Applied aquatic has sprayed 392 acres in Monkey box, Harney pond, Eagle Bay Island, Kings Bar Tin house cove and Indian prairie marsh. They did have to stop early because of low water levels.

Alyssa Jorden reported plantings on Lake Okeechobee. The plantings were in the marsh and on some of the created islands on the lake. 900 trees including bald cypress and pond apple were planted in March at the North West marsh. They have also been treating the torpedograss using Tiger, a new herbicide for grass treatments. In Gourd Island they also planted trees and removed vines and upland invasive using clipper to protect the new growing trees.

Dan Roberts reported on the prescribed fires. In April they conducted a burn outside of Moore haven that was about 1500-2000 acres. Earlier in the year a burn was completed in the northwest marsh that was approx. 8,000-10,000 acres. FWC pulled a permit near dyes ditch that was about 100 acres that was about 3 weeks ago. Another burn was completed in the south end of the lake in burnt bridge area near Torrey and Kreamer Island. 400-500 acres was completed with the interagency help. Tuesday June 4th, a torpedograss treatment will be completed in the North West marsh. Agriculture spray equipment will be used to treat 1140 acres of torpedograss. They are performing a block treatment, one block will be sprayed with imazapyr MSO and the other block will be sprayed with a mixture of imazapyr MSO and glyphosate. This will help determine which block will support more native growth after treatment. "The torpedograss has choked out that marsh." Dan reported that deer, turkey and other bird species should be using that marsh but they are unable to get to the native grasses that they feed on. Billy Locker wanted an update on an area to burn located down near tin house cove at a berm area. Dan replied that the lake level is too low to burn and not dry enough to bring in equipment for muck removal. It's still a possibility to do if the lake levels continue to drop. Approximately 12,000 acres have been burned this year but the amount may be larger however shape files are still being made of the burn areas to get a better estimate.

Alyssa mentions that the low water levels have encouraged a lot of eel grass to grow. Tin house cove is full of eel grass and some hydrilla. The water is clearing up in these areas. FWC is also working on a paper about the series of hurricanes that we've had and its effects on the fish populations because of high water events. She mentions that low lake levels encourage SAV's to grow and fish to spawn "we are hopeful this low lake level will provide a good response." Paul Gray from Audubon said "I think a lot of people will be real happy when the water does start to come back up." The last seven years has been an average of 16ft and that has caused the SAV to decline.

USACE

Jessica Fair reported that they took USDA out on May 14th to release megamelus west of Kreamer area. They released approximately 15,300 megamelus. As of today USDA has released approximately 47,000 megamelus in 32 locations around the lake since 2014. This will be a continuous project. Jon Lane mentioned that the Corps is looking into a new technology for low water harvesting but as of right now this is a preliminary idea and a demonstration (not on the

lake) will be put together in the next couple months. Jon Morton gave an update on the terrestrial work being done around the dike over the last three years. One revolution was completed around the lake and 21 category 1 invasive were identified and taken out. The next site will be near Yankee point where Brazilian pepper and rosewood will be taken out.

SFWMD

Alex Onisko gave an update on the melaluca treatments that have been going on for the last 20+ years. Aerial mapping of melaluca was completed and three main areas were focused on including Clewiston, Fisheating Bay/Harney pond, and Indian prairie. The low lake levels allowed for the use of one boat with four labors including a buggy to treat the areas. The melaluca was girdled and herbicide was applied. Almost all melaluca identified during the aerial mapping was treated but a few were inaccessible due to water levels. Once the levels return they will be looking to go back in to those areas to see if they are more accessible.

The Okeechobee Gourd is starting to come back with the low lake levels. Alex asked if anyone sees the gourd on the lake to take pictures and waypoints to help with the surveying and send the information to her. aonisko@sfwmd.gov. Alex also mentions there is a new invasive on the lake. It's an invasive sedge called wrights nut rush. It's been found in the Moore Haven marsh. It's creates a thick area that smothers native marsh vegetation. FWC and SFWMD are working together to identify locations, on the lake, of the plant to take care of the invasive before it takes hold. PPT will be added to the meeting minutes. Alyssa mentioned that they have documented the plant in the northwest marsh area "there's quite a bit out there." Alyssa said it's intermixed with the torpedograss so hopefully some will be taken out with the upcoming treatment in that area.

MaryAnn Martin mentioned that there were shredded peppergrass and SAV's in bustards roost from haul seiners. FWC said they will look into that area.

Adjournment

**** The next interagency flight will be June 5th

**** The next interagency meeting will be scheduled in the near future.

Attachments-

- Projection analysis
- Flight reports
- A Tale of Two Lakes
- Scientific paper
- Melaluca treatment
- Okeechobee Gourd