GUEST COLUMN—USACE UPDATES DRY-SEASON APPROACH FOR LAKE OKEECHOBEE

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We are now approaching the end of 2019, finishing a very good year for Lake Okeechobee. We avoided high-volume releases during the summer and saw significant growth in the submerged aquatic vegetation, improved lake ecology, and avoided significant storm events and impacts to water supply. In order to continue the trend, the water management team at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is now focused on the year ahead and the challenges that we face.

We came into this dry season with the lake relatively low for this time of year, influenced a shorter wet season than normal and by the driest September on record. October and November were better as lake levels remained mostly constant. Because we are in such a different position this year relative to a year ago, we want to share how the Corps will approach this dry season.

Unlike last year, our focus this year will be on retaining water during the dry season. We're looking at a relatively normal dry-season forecast. With precipitation expected to be closer to normal, we will focus on a projected lake level that ensures we maintain enough water in the lake to enter wet season without water supply concerns. Our best estimate is that the lake will be approximately 12 feet on June 1st which is a great position to begin the wet season. We will keep a close eye on that mark. We will continue to supply the Caloosahatchee some fresh-water flows as long as possible to maintain that delicate ecosystem.

We will finalize the proposed deviation to give us another tool to use if harmful algae becomes problematic next year. I want to stress that this is a separate action from the flexibility we used a year ago. Under our proposed deviation, we could choose (if conditions support) to release less than suggested guidance in the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS) when

blooms are present or anticipated, in exchange for the flexibility to release that water when algae is absent. In other words, when conditions indicate an impending algae bloom threat, we would time releases in a manner that avoids harm to downstream communities while releasing the same volume of water in the aggregate.

Since the summer of 2018, we've had success thinking outside the box and using our authorities responsibly when managing water in the lake. While I'm pleased with the results we achieved in 2019, the dry September and short wet season has challenged us. However, I have confidence that our team, in close coordination with our partners at the South Florida Water Management District, will continue to manage water in south Florida to balance the multiple (and sometimes competing) interests in the region.