

Report to the Southwest Florida Watershed Council on the
South Florida Water Management District Water Resources Advisory Commission Meeting
Thursday, January 5, 2006

Howard Wegis, Beverly Grady and I traveled to the South Florida Water Management District headquarters for the WRAC meeting Thursday. Eric Lindblad attended the meeting as a visitor.

As always, the meeting opened with comments from members of the WRAC. Issues raised included:

- a desire for a better process and schedule for input with regard to Everglades restoration issues now that Project Development Teams are no longer being used (Dennis Duke of the Corps and Mike Collins each assured us that Working Group meetings will take place on a monthly basis and will provide opportunities for input before decisions are made),
- the opportunity to find synergy between the Governor's LOER program and his recent energy summit by looking to agriculture as a source of energy in Florida,
- a desire to learn more about the Rural Land Stewardship Program (Walker Banning from the Florida Department of Community Affairs will be invited to speak to the WRAC),
- a challenge to the WRAC to have a 100-fold increase in environmental stewardship at the SFWMD this year, specifically addressing the establishment of reservations for natural systems,
- an update on the rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover dike (a two year program with a price tag of about \$20 million will be underway soon, while the total estimate to complete all necessary work is about \$250 million),
- some local governments are concerned that the requirement that 100% of new water come from alternative waters supplies may not be the most cost-effective way to get water, particularly if local governments and local utilities are going to be required to pay the associated costs,
- a concern that the alignment of a roadway is dictating the location of the C-111 Spreader canal (Mike Collins stated that he believes there is not enough money available to go back to the original proposed alignment of the canal, and that he thinks Florida Bay and Biscayne Bay will derive the benefits needed through the alignment planned. He also said that a challenge to this alignment will result in the project being pulled from Acceler8,
- a desire for the WRAC members to bring ideas to the next meeting for issues we'd like to discuss.

Agenda items included presentations and discussions on the following major topics:

1. Lake Okeechobee:

- Susan Sylvester, formerly with the Corps and now with the SFWMD, provided an overview of Lake operations in 2005. Water levels are falling (on the day we met, the Lake was at an elevation of 15.63, compared to 15.57 one year ago) and indications point to a normal or below normal dry season. The Corps will manage the Lake proactively during the dry season, aiming toward a level of 14 feet on May 1st. See http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/water_conditions_010506.ppt for Susan's complete presentation. It was interesting to me that flows on January 3, 2006 at S-77 were 1,040 cfs, at S-78 were 2,399 cfs, and at S-79 were 3,066 cfs. Watershed contributions were significant between the lake and the Franklin Lock – Chip told me that the water came mostly from agricultural lands north of the Caloosahatchee.

- Cal Neidrauer presented some information regarding historical flows and Phosphorus loads to and from the Lake. See http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/lake_o_flows_010506.ppt for his presentation. WRAC members discussed this information at length, offering many comments as to how the information could be further broken down to be helpful to interested stakeholders. The WRAC Lake O Committee's Technical subcommittee didn't make as much progress on its report as it had hoped to in 2005 because of Hurricane Wilma – this information will be part of its report, now expected sometime this year.
- Chip Merriam made a presentation entitled “Flood the Sugar Cane Farms Now to Save the Estuaries: Is This Feasible?” See http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/eea_storage_010506.ppt. Many issues were addressed in the presentation, which concluded that the social and economic costs inherent in storing water temporarily in the EAA would derive minimal benefits for the estuaries. The solution to the problems that result from sending excess Lake O water to the estuaries was deemed the implementation of LOER and Acceler8 projects, i.e., in the short term, there is no hope that the estuaries will not be flooded if Lake levels are deemed too high by the Corps and the SFWMD. A copy of a letter sent to the Chairman of the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida by the District Commander of the Corps in 1997 was distributed to further explain to WRAC members why storing water in the EAA was not deemed feasible when the Everglades restoration plan was being developed. I'll scan a copy of this letter and add it to this report. It was suggested that the District develop a similar analysis detailing the economic and social costs related to the flooding of the estuaries in order to provide policy makers and other water managers with the full perspective on the issues involved with Lake releases – this suggestion was not well-received (it would be difficult and expensive).
- Susan Gray gave a brief update on the LOER program – see http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/eea_storage_010506.ppt. There was no new information in this update. Susan did state that the element of LOER to revise ERP criteria intends for the entire Caloosahatchee watershed to be included (as opposed to just the Caloosahatchee estuary watershed).
- Benita Whalen made a presentation on the status of efforts to find alternative locations to store and/or dispose of excess surface water (as opposed to sending it to Lake O and the estuaries). See her presentation at http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/water_storage_010506.ppt. Two assessments are underway (the northern and southern watersheds of the Lake). She is developing a list of potential water storage sites, ranked by maximum potential volume of storage. The first part of the assessment is focusing on storage options on public lands (the Powerpoint has very interesting info regarding this), and Governing Board member Harkley Thornton is spearheading the effort to identify options on private lands.

2. Alternative Water Supply and Water Supply Plan Updates

John Mulliken provided an overview of the status of Senate Bill 444 implementation and the status of the Water Supply Plan Update planning process. See his presentation at http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/alt_water_010506.ppt. I didn't hear anything new regarding the AWS program. The Water Supply Plan Updates now have a target deadline of July, 2006. The next meeting for the Lower West Coast Water Supply Plan Update will be in

February (Lind Hoppes told us that a new staff member has joined the SFWMD to work on this – his name is Mike Coates, ext. 7755).

Since the Updates are supposed to address natural system demands as well as public water supply, agriculture and irrigation demands, I asked for an update on the status of the legal challenge regarding water reservations. The first part of the rule challenge had been resolved -- the Hearing Officer determined that the SFWMD and the FDEP do indeed have the authority to establish water reservations. The Hearing Officer heard arguments in December about whether or not the rulemaking had been arbitrary and capricious. Each party is to file their Proposed Final Order by January 17th. Cecile Ross (the SFWMD attorney who reported on this to us) said she expects the Hearing Officer will issue a Final Order by mid-February.

I then asked about the status of the ongoing scientific work to determine what each initial reservation should be. At the Lower West Coast Water Supply Plan Update meeting held in Fort Myers last fall, the SFWMD provided no information on natural system demands, and no information has been provided since that time. John Mulliken and Mike Collins each assured us that the work is indeed progressing, but provided no details or a timeframe for the sharing of information.

Mike Collins then said that utility interests from the east coast are "pushing back" against reservations, saying that the SFWMD doesn't have enough information to establish them, and saying that he thought they might make a showing at the Governing Board meeting this month (January 11th). He said that west coast stakeholders are behind reservations, and that he'll need our support.

3. Acceler8 Outreach

Alvin Jackson presented information about the SFWMD's Acceler8 jobs training and business development program, which is under way now to train workers for the jobs being created through the Acceler8 program and to create opportunities for small and local businesses to compete successfully for contracts related to Acceler8. His presentation can be viewed at http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/acceler8_010506.ppt.

4. Florida Bay Minimum Flows and Levels

John Mulliken and David Rudnick provided a briefing on the process for and technical analysis and findings related to the establishment of MFLs for Florida Bay. Their presentations are available at http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/floridabay_mfl_010506.ppt and http://www.sfwmd.gov/gover/wrac/ref_mat/mfls_010506.ppt.