

**Lake Okeechobee
Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force
Meeting Proceedings**

The following individuals attended the Lake Okeechobee Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force meeting 8th August 2019 at the SFWMD Okeechobee Service Center, Okeechobee Fl.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Jessica Fair
Angie Huebner
Jon Lane
Chelsea Bohaty
Josh Bauer
Ian Markovich

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

Alyssa Jordon
Matt Phillips
Tyler Beck
Danielle Kirkland
Brendon Hession
Beacham Furse

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)

Bobby Campbell
Kaitlyn Quincy
Linda Yarrish

Lee County Hyacinth Control District (LCHCD)

Colin Lewis
Jason Cull
Lee Martin

Other Attendees

Heather Tipton (USFWS)
Kellie Ralston (Stakeholder)
Gary Jennings (Stakeholder)
Paul Gray (Audubon)
Linda Defee (AVC)
Scott Jackson (Syngenta)
James Boggs (Helena)
Keith Mangus (AAM)
Kelli Gladding (UF)
Emily Hunter (Stakeholder)

Call to order

Jessica Fair called the meeting to order at 10:00am.

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 multidisciplinary 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.

Scientific Discussion

The scientific discussion was on an article from the Treasure Coast Newspaper written by Ed Killer. The article was named FWC: Lake Okeechobee bass population lagging, but stable, years after Hurricane Irma. Jessica Fair discussed how the article was good but was concerned about the potential inaccurate correlations the article was making between fish populations and water levels. Jon Lane was concerned about the section of the article saying that 14-16-foot range is the best level for the lake. The article may help imply that higher lake levels help with bass population. However, many variables were not being considered, including low lake levels bringing an increase in submersed aquatic vegetation (SAV) since sunlight was able to reach the lake bottom. With an increase in SAV, small fry fish can hide from predator and increase the fish population over time. Then waters increase and fisherman are able to get farther back into areas to fish, making it easier and more likely to catch fish. Jon Lane (USACE) mentions that its more longer-term circumstances that are causing these trends. It takes years for plants to recuperate from hurricanes or large weather events and it takes fish populations even longer to regain their population after the plants regrow. Alyssa Jordon (FWC) suggested we could encourage the media to approach the biologists working on the lake to get a more rounded opinion of what is happening on the Lake to try and reduce the inaccurate or misleading information. Tyler Beck suggests we should reach out to the media and Ed to ask if they would consider our information when releasing an article about this. Paul Gray from Audubon mentioned it's hard for the public to understand the drawdowns help decomposition of the muck material which in turn release nutrients into the system. The release in this nutrient is what is helping make the fishing so good right now and without those drawdowns we would not have this decomposition of material. Jason Cull from Lee county Hyacinth control District mentioned that they have a good relationship with their local news stations and suggested we have a point of contact for the local news stations around the lake to help control some of the information that is going out to the public.

Interagency Flight Report

Brendon Hession (FWC) discussed the interagency flight reports and acreage on the lake. The last three months we had about 1400-1000 acres on the lake up until the January flight where acreage has decreased to around 490 acres. Treatment efforts were resorted to the western side of the lake recently which helped decrease the acreage. The north western and western part of the lake is still the area of the lake that is maintaining the most vegetation from Harney pond to

Kissimmee river (zone 6 zone 8). Biologists think this is mainly because of the harvesting areas that were implemented months ago.

Beacham (FWC) added that in the article that was discussed earlier they talk about how an angler mentioned that high water has really helped the plant levels. Looking at the interagency flight graph that is what it looks like. As water levels rise plants go down however, that is not what's happening. The reason for the reduction in plants is due to heavier efforts on treating these plants around the lake.

FWC (IPM)

Brendon Hession discussed plans for managing *Scleria lacustris* (Wrights nutrush), *Luziola*, and wild sugar cane on the lake. These plans are possible now since floating plants are under control. The *Scleria* is mainly on the western marsh and north western marsh and has seeded since 2017. Hot spot areas include east and west of the Moore haven canal and towards Turner cove area. Treatment is estimated to begin in May. Alyssa mentioned that there may be *Scleria* on the west side of Indian prairie since that was a known area it was seen in the past.

Plans to treat the rest of the *luziola* were also discussed. Brendon made a map on areas around the lake where *luziola* has not been treated yet or has not been the focus areas for treatment. Treated areas include the fish-eating bay area, the mouth of the Indian prairie canal, and eagle bay island. Areas that are still in need for treatment include yankee point, Mctush cut, a section in fisheating bay, monkey box and monkey box run. Jessica (USACE) mentioned that the *luziola* in the USACE AOR, going down the rim canal from old sportsman's to uncle joes cut, has been treated. A discussion on how these areas should be treated was requested. Alyssa mentioned that we need to make sure the areas treated will not be affecting nesting wading birds. Discussions on whether certain areas should be treated via helicopter would be worth looking into. Alyssa suggested using helicopters in the larger areas now; will help us gain ground on the *luziola* and then we can use efforts to fight the *Scleria* in the marshes. Paul Gray (Audubon) assured that the nesting birds that could impact this treatment will not be nesting until around March. Areas that are being considered for aerial are monocultured *luziola*.

Wild sugar cane is another invasive that FWC would like to manage now that floating plant populations have decreased. About 1.5 acres of wild sugar cane exist on the HHD at canal point, chancey bay, and J & S boat lock. Alyssa (FWC) suggested treating the sugar cane how they treat the phragmites, by chopping the tops and then treating the stems to help get the herbicide to reach the rhizomes. Jessica (USACE) said that USACE has a contractor to treat the rip rap and would see if any of these areas would be within their AOR to help with treatment.

FWC (ARHS)

FWC ARHS, will be conducting a small 5-acre shredding project in early February around the north west islands to create a fire break around the islands. Machines will be going out of yankee point and the Indian prairie boat ramp.

Alyssa wanted to bring up a discussion on reducing woody material in the marsh in order to help with Black Rail habitat. Black Rails are a very allusive bird that have recently been listed as threatened. Mechanically removing excessive woody vegetation or treated woody vegetation in larger areas with herbicide may help create better habitat for the black rails which need a very specific water level (about 1 inch deep) and habitat (open marsh with no woody vegetation) to survive. The Black Rails will be surveyed soon. FWC received a grant to surveys in wetlands including lake O however, water levels need to come down. Since this species is so allusive, very little information is known about them. Currently their status is not being considered for the Lake Okeechobee regulation schedule, however, other forms of the plan will hopefully cover them indirectly.

FWC (Snail Kite)

Tyler Beck gave an update on the 2021 snail kite surveys around the Lake. There are two nests being build just north of Lake Hicpochee and another in the C-44 reservoir in an STA cell. Currently there are several snail kites that have move into the lake. Tyler recently went out to survey a few areas in the lake including steamboat marsh. This area had multiple snail kites and has been an area where they have nested in the past including 2018. Moonshine bay will be surveyed soon and is another hot spot for kites. FWC expects snail kites to nest this year. Its been about 2 years since they have nested on the lake. Tyler explained the protocols that will go into place once a snail kite nest has been identified. A 500-foot buffer will be placed around the nest. This area is a no entry area. Traffic through main trails that could be impacted by the 500 ft buffer are still permitted. A 500-meter buffer is placed around the nest as well. This buffer is a “do not modify” this area as to not disrupt foraging habitats for the snail kites. Selective herbicides can be used in this area since it will help open up native habitat for the kites and reduce invasive crowded vegetation. Alyssa (FWC) added she will work with Tyler in order to avoid any impact during their shredding projects of the islands in the NW marsh.

USACE

USACE has had two areas within their AOR treated since the last interagency meeting. The two areas include the rim canal from Old sportsman’s to Clewiston and the southern end of the lake from Pelican bay to Rita Island. Over all 625 acres of invasive floating plants have been treated since the last meeting. Starting Feb 1st, contractors will be moving to west wall to treat this area. Jessica (USACE) also would like to thank Lee county Hyacinth control district for helping treat floating vegetation that was making its way down the Caloosahatchee. This vegetation contained a relatively new invasive, Tropical watergrass aka *Luziola subintegra* that we are trying to help reduce the spread from the lake area as much as possible. The county quickly came out and treated this vegetation that could have easily spread luziola down the Caloosahatchee.

Public Comment

There was no public comment during the meeting.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11: 45am