

Lake Okeechobee
Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force
Meeting Proceedings

The following individuals attended the Lake Okeechobee Aquatic Plant Management Interagency Task Force meeting 12 Dec 2018 at the USACE South Florida Operations Office Clewiston, Fl.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)

Jon Morton

Jon Lane

Chelsea Bohaty

Tyler Green

Jessica Fair

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

Mariah McInnis

Steven Gornak

Alyssa Jordan

Dan Roberts

Don Fox

Andrea Dominguez

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)

Robert Campbell

Linda Yarrish

Other Attendees

Jason Cull, Lee County Hyacinth Control District

James Boggs, Helena

Tony Canton, Texas Aquatics

Linda Defee, AVC

Kyle Thayer, UF-FLREC

Bryan Honnerlaw, Angler board

Call to Order

Jessica Fair called the meeting to order at 10:00AM. Roll call was taken. The public comment period was announced however, there were no participants.

Status report on Program Activities FWC

Mariah started off the status report for program activities on Lake O. Since October 10th they have treated 2,069 acres using airboats. Currently AVC has 8 boats Applied Aquatic has between 6-10 boats and Lake and Wetlands has 3 boats. Lake and wetland will be fading off, while ABC will be taking over for their region. The aerial treatment went through November 5th- 9th. There were issues with wind, weather, etc. So the aerial continued to the following week from November 12th through 14th. FWC was approved for 5,000 acres and 3,960 acres was treated. In October (pre aerial treatment) the flight survey had an average of 1,943 total. The flight survey on December 5th (post aerial treatment) had an average of 429 acres total of aquatic plants. Mariah mentioned that the aerial treatment was a success -“Really successful, everything’s looking good out there.” She mentions the bulk of the acreage was treated around Ritta Island, including coot’s bay. Jon Morton asked Mariah what the majority of the invasive plants were out on the lake. Mariah responded “It’s a little bit of both but seems to be a little more lettuce.” She explains that there was a lot on the outside edges that was moving around including the interior Ritta, Torrey and Kreamer. Jon Lane mentioned the west wall seemed to have the majority of the aquatic plants and Mariah replied that it was mostly lettuce. Bryan Honnerlaw from the public commented “I know this looks like a big win, I stand and work with you on the spraying, but the lake does not look good” He continues “the lake is turbid, and there is very little weeds out there.” He would like to see more weeds out on the lake to help filter the water. Mariah responds “we understand that there are short term benefits to these plants, and that there can help filter water but the long term negative consequences far out way the short term benefits in our opinion.” Mariah talks about how they try to keep the sprayers out of certain areas that could be more delicate than other areas including areas used for waterfowl season. Tony Canton asked if they have a cost to back up short term vs long term benefits. He is concerned that spraying is not the only avenue that could be used here and he mentions mechanical harvesting as a suggestion to other alternatives. Mariah expresses how fast the invasive plants can grow and explains there have been studies done to show the negative consequences to these plants- “leaving an acre of water hyacinth over a full year can contribute up to 500 tons of plant material on the bottom of the waterway.” “The plants shed material; their releasing more nutrients in the water column, increasing the sediment, hence their increasing turbidity so that is something we consider as far as why we want to treat these plants in smaller amounts instead of let them grow.” Tony Canton mentions harvesting in Lake Okeechobee has declined and now has stopped. “It has changed over to basically spraying, which I don’t have a problem with spraying; some areas do need sprayed.” “Some areas can be managed better by harvesting.” Tony Canton continues discussing the buildup of material is a concern and mentions harvesting could be another tool to be used especially to remove tussocks. Steven Gornak mentions the difficulty of harvesting on the lake. “For herbicide work we spend \$100 an acre using an airboat; recently we got quotes in on bids for harvesting and those ran from 400,000-900,000 dollars on 40 acres.” “It’s getting to a point where harvesting is too expensive.” Jon lane also comments on how difficult it is to harvest on the lake. “Lake Okeechobee is a lot bigger and you have to move that material somewhere; when you have to move the material 4 miles, just one load, it costs an incredible amount of money.” He continues with how it disrupts the environment “we were chopping up, fish, turtles, and snakes in there as well.” Jon mentions it is our primary choice to use harvesting on tussocks in waterways and boat trails, but it is not viable to use it for a preventative tool. Don Fox comments

about a project comparing spraying and harvesting- “they actually watched what was coming up on the harvesters and the amount of fish and everything else that it was killing.” He adds “there is a tradeoff everywhere.” Tony Canton replies that they have been working in Citrus County for the last few years and have mentioned “we have half way resolved the problem of travel time by creating islands.” “Tony mentioned “we would be happy to work with you guys, to lower the price down.” “The main objective to not cost, the main objective is the long term damaged that are being done to the environment, water sources, are unadvised.” Tony continues to express his concerns about the lake and its waters and using harvesting as a tool. “We would just like to be more contributive to the lake.” Don asked Bryan Honnerlaw about the turbidity of the lake. “Generally once the lake reaches 13ft, the south of the lake starts to clear up; are you not seeing it clear up on the south end?” Bryan replied that “it’s hard to find clear water.” Bryan would like to see more hydrilla on the lake to help filter the water. He would like to see Lake Tohopekaliga not treat their hydrilla to help filter the water before it comes into Lake Okeechobee.

FWC

Dan Roberts gave an update on the projects discussed at the last interagency meeting. The North West marsh berm removal will have to be put on hold since the waters have been too low to continue. The Burnout Bridge and Dyess ditch project was started by spraying clear cast. “The vegetation is browning and it should be ready for a burn in late January early February.” Jon Lane asked what they would like the lake level to be at. Dan and Alyssa replied that the lake levels aren’t a factor for that since they will do a burn using airboats or a drip torch. Steve added that “it is good to burn that cattail so the excess material will be removed from the system so it doesn’t create the organic material.” Dan mentions that we had an interagency burn team meeting after the last interagency meeting. “South Florida wanted to burn around Moore Haven area, which we had burned around 1500 acres.” He adds that today they are also burning in that area. FWC is still unable to pull permits. “We are unable to pull permits but we are unable to pull permits but we are able to assist.” SFWMD will be able to burn the FWC project areas if they do not have the ability to pull permits by February. “We are going to try to spray and burn kings bar area.” He adds that in their project area they would like to do a larger burn in Dyess Ditch and Burnout Bridge areas. Jon Lane asked when they would like to burn the kings bar area. Dan replied “sometime soon; in the next couple months.” FWC would need to be release from their ban from pulling permits. Alyssa mentioned we would be disking in the beginning of January around their trees that were planted. Alyssa commented “the plan is to burn as much as we can this year.” “We have multiple burn bosses this year.” Bryan asked how low the lake has to be to start scrapping.” Alyssa and Dan replied “probably 10ft and for a few months.” Bryan mentioned that water is being released from Moore Haven and wanted to know if that is to get the lake down. Alyssa replied “it’s to keep salt water intrusion from happening.” Alyssa also added that agriculture starts pulling water from the system during this time of year which helps drop the water levels. “I don’t know if we will get 10ft this year.” She mentions that if we don’t have any hurricanes or a heavy rain season that by next spring the waters might drop low enough for a scrapping project. “Sometimes it’s almost a year or two in advance that you start looking at the lake levels and where they may be.” She discusses that this spring the lake probably will not get low enough for the big scrapping projects to happen but hopefully by next spring the waters will be low enough. “We do have a berm removal project we are looking to do this spring if the water

levels stay low enough.” The location of this project will be by the Pierce canal. Bryan is concerned about the length of time it could take to begin these projects. He believes that it would be good to “let the water out and do it. Don’t make this a several year process.” He is concerned that the water level will be economically damaging to fishing guides.” “Drop it or don’t.” Jon Lane asked if the fisherman are concerned with several years of having a low lake. Bryan replied with “we are already low right now.” Alyssa and Don Fox replied “this isn’t low” Don mentions a paper that water management did in 2004-2005 during the low water period. “It has to be down long enough for the seeds to germinate.” The paper was looking at bass production. “If the lake is only down 60-90 days you won’t see the eel grass germinate and stuff like that. The spike rush germinate in moist soil and won’t germinate in flooding.” Steve Gornak added “ultimately we would like to do is use the natural dry time to do the work instead of drawing it down a second time.” Alyssa mentions that there are two scrapping projects they are wanting to do on the lake need low water levels but they have to wait for the water to naturally go down “we are not purposefully drawing the water down, we are waiting for natural draw down or drought.” Jon Morton adds that that is a big miss conception on the lake that the water gets manually pulled down. Alyssa replied “that has only happened once between the years 1999-2000.” Jon Lane mentions the (LORS) Lake Okeechobee regulation schedule, that is being reevaluated and will cover the next three or four years. “They won’t just pull it down for just anything.” He discusses the difficulty of having the lake “pulled down” and added “unless there is a huge public outcry which there probably isn’t going to be enough to get it drawn down right now.” He discusses the reevaluation and how they will open it up to suggestions of lake levels. “I encourage you to participate in that and express why those needs are there on a natural resource side.” Alyssa discusses how there are conflicting interests on the water level from natural resource opinion’s to agricultural opinions. “They don’t want us to pull the water levels down because that would reduce their water supply.” Bryan talks about how the lake level has changed where they have access for fishing. He discusses how he used to be able to get back into areas when the lake level was at 12ft but now even when it is 13ft they are still unable to get back to certain areas. Don replied about how the weed level has changed. “You have the high water and the weed line moves back, you were here years ago when the lake level was low and the weed line was farther out now what’s happened is that the weed line is farther in so now you are in shallow water.” Alyssa explains how the low levels will help with this problem. “If we get another low period, we can get that marsh to move back out and at 13ft you would still be ok but we can’t get that marsh reestablished at high water levels.” Jon Lane discusses how we are in a la Nina and that means that the long range forecast projects we will be having a wet winter. He then mentions how this will affect the water levels “it’s not getting down to anywhere near what we need it to be 10ft or 11ft.” Mariah asked when they would be opening up a comment period for the LORS. Jon discussed that “probably in the next five months they will be scheduling meetings” This would be great for the public to join and will allow for comments and concerns to be heard about the schedule.

USACE

Jon Morton updated the agency about a crew that will be going from the north side of the Kissimmee up to lock 7, treating Brazilian pepper, climbing cassia, china berry and Bamboo.

They are trying to make it to Taylor creek for this budget. This will hopefully be completed by the end of February early March. “Then that will be one complete revolution around the HHD for terrestrial work.”

SFWMD

Bobbie Campbell discussed how much less invasive plants there were on the flight that was done on December 5th. There has been some melaleuca trees seen on the lake. However, Bobbie was unsure if there is still any ongoing projects for the trees. Alyssa adds that they will send out coordinates to Alex Onisko from SFWMD on any melaleuca found.

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

Adjournment

Jessica Fair adjourned the Task Force meeting at 10:50am.