



just the FACTs

This fact sheet is provided as a reference to encourage a greater understanding of the various issues related to managing water in South Florida.



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Lake Okeechobee Coastal Releases

The ecological health of the coastal estuaries is essential to sustaining the overall way of life and economy of South Florida. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) recognizes the impact that large freshwater releases have on the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and is committed to minimizing impacts to the fullest extent possible.

Background

- Lake Okeechobee historically overflowed its natural banks, sending a sheet flow of water south through the expansive Everglades.
- In the aftermath of the infamous Storm of 1928, which pushed water out of the shallow lake and drowned thousands of people, the federal government authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to build the Herbert Hoover Dike in 1930.
- Over seven years, the Corps built a series of levees, culverts and locks to encompass the lake, including 67 miles of dikes along the southern shore. In 1938, the Corps began to regulate lake levels between 14 and 17 feet.

How Lake Levels are Operated

- The Corps manages Lake Okeechobee water levels with the goal of balancing flood control, public safety, navigation, water supply and ecological health.
- The Corps bases operational decisions – whether to retain or release water in the 730-square-mile lake – on its regulation schedule and the best available science and data provided by its staff and a variety of partners, including the SFWMD.
- Rehabilitation of the nearly 80-year-old Herbert Hoover Dike is a Corps top safety priority.

Why Large Releases Occur

- Today, the Corps strives to maintain Lake Okeechobee's water level between 12.5 feet and 15.5 feet NGVD.
- The lake's water level can rise up to six times faster than water can be discharged. By initially prescribing low-volume releases, the regulation schedule reduces the frequency of larger releases that have greater impact on coastal estuaries. However, if inflows and levels continue to increase, larger releases are required.
- The Corps continuously monitors the effects of any releases on the estuaries and confers with its partner agencies and stakeholders to modify releases to help minimize impacts to coastal waters.