



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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New Protocols Seek Improved Balance for Lake Okeechobee Operations *Revised document guides SFWMD recommendations for federal management of lake*



(Click on the photo for a larger version.)

West Palm Beach, FL – The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board today provided input on an updated document to guide District recommendations to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers about the management of Lake Okeechobee. Known as Adaptive Protocols for Lake Okeechobee Operations, the document lays out measures to better balance the needs of the lake and estuarine ecosystems and South Florida’s water supply within existing lake regulations.

“Our guidance to staff on using Adaptive Protocols should improve the operation of Lake Okeechobee for the benefit of both the environment and permitted water users,” said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann. “The District has worked diligently with our stakeholders and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for more than a year to study protocols that result in more ‘win-win’ scenarios for everyone who relies on the lake’s limited water supply.”

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 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, data and recommendations provided by its staff and a variety of partners, including the District.

Under its Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule, which was revised in 2008, the Corps seeks to manage the lake between 12.5 and 15.5 feet throughout the year. This range is designed to protect the integrity of the 143-mile-long Herbert Hoover Dike during its ongoing rehabilitation but leaves water resources more limited during dry periods for permitted water users and natural systems, such as the Caloosahatchee Estuary.

Originally developed in 2003, the Adaptive Protocols represent a scientifically based method to help District water managers address parts of the regulation schedule that allow regulatory and environmental lake releases but do not suggest a specific volume to discharge. The guidance document also serves as a tool to inform the SFWMD Governing Board and the public about operational decisions related to the lake.

In August 2009, the District began an extensive public process through its advisory commission to update the Adaptive Protocols for the Corps' 2008 lake regulation schedule. Over a series of workshops, a diverse group of stakeholders – including advocates for the lake and the Caloosahatchee Estuary and representatives of the agricultural industry – worked with SFWMD scientists and engineers to revise the protocols to better address the following ongoing challenges:

- Maintaining appropriate salinity levels in the Caloosahatchee Estuary.
- Reducing the likelihood of the lake level falling low enough to create a water shortage.
- Limiting exceedances of Lake Okeechobee's minimum flows and levels (MFL) rule, which can cause ecological harm to the lake.

The new Adaptive Protocols provide guidance on release rates to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries under two specific scenarios:

- Early in the dry season, when the lake is in the upper end of the preferred management range, the protocols suggest regulatory releases of less than 50 percent of the maximum amount allowed under the Corps' regulation schedule. The recommendation is designed to reserve water for later in the dry season when the need is greatest.
- During the dry season, a flow chart lays out a range of release recommendations when the Caloosahatchee Estuary needs fresh water to avoid high salinity levels that could harm the ecosystem. Computer simulations were used to develop these release recommendations so they could benefit the estuary, the lake and permitted water users.

The Adaptive Protocols do not alter the Corps' regulation schedule or the District's water shortage rules. The SFWMD Governing Board and the Corps can choose to override the recommendations depending on regional conditions and forecasts.

More details about the revised Adaptive Protocols are available in [*Just the Facts: Adaptive Protocols for Lake Okeechobee Operations*](#). To learn more about the management of Lake Okeechobee, please see [*Just the Facts: Lake Okeechobee Operation – Goals, Roles and Responsibilities*](#).

The final version of the Adaptive Protocols for Lake Okeechobee Operations is available [here](#).

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About the South Florida Water Management District

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.