

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0918

March 11, 2019

Colonel Andrew Kelly
Jacksonville District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207

Dear Colonel Kelly:

I first want to sincerely thank you for your commitment to lowering Lake Okeechobee in advance of the wet season. For the first time in a long time, under your leadership, the Army Corps is taking bold action to preemptively mitigate the need for summer discharges. I also want to thank you for your commitment during 2018 to sending large volumes of water south, and again, over the past few weeks, for sending most of the outflows from the lake south. This is how it should be, so I wanted to be sure to pass along my gratitude.

I also believe it is important that we do not rest on small victories before the real battles are won. On February 23, 2019, you announced that the Army Corps would begin discharging water into the St. Lucie estuary at an average rate of 500 cubic feet per second (cfs) for 21 days. At the time, we spoke, and I voiced my opposition to this plan. With the 21 days ending this week, I am writing to again urge you not to continue these discharges east as part of your efforts to lower lake levels.

The discharges into the St. Lucie threaten far more damage than they provide benefit. Over 21 days of 500 cfs discharges to the St. Lucie, we expect to receive approximately 6.8 billion gallons of Lake Okeechobee water. This is a tiny fraction of the overall outflows for this time period and contributes only about a half of an inch reduction in lake level.

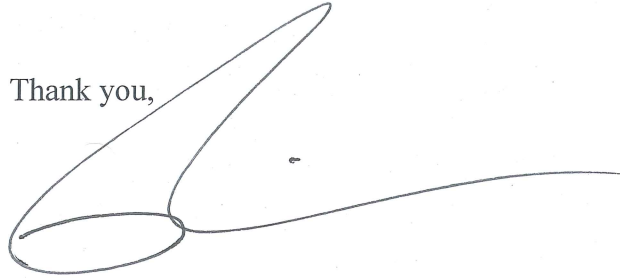
On the other hand, continuing these releases now could undo important ecological recovery that has taken place in the St. Lucie since discharges stopped last summer. Already, the salinity levels in the South Fork have plummeted thanks to this new round of freshwater discharges. This has caused the Florida Oceanographic Society to rate the water quality in the South Fork an "F" grade. Moreover, it is likely that continued discharges beyond the March 16, 2019 deadline would affect the estuary's oyster spawning season. As you know, oysters are critically important to our estuary's ecosystem for a variety of reasons and threatening a full year's worth of oysters would have deeply damaging repercussions.

For all of these reasons, I am urging you to cease discharges to the St. Lucie estuary. By maximizing flexibility elsewhere in the system, including full utilization of dispersed water

management projects and other structures south of the lake, we can achieve the goal of lowering the lake level prior to wet season while also protecting the health of our estuaries.

Thank you for your urgent consideration of this request. Working together, I am confident that we can defend the health and safety of all people in south Florida, ensure drinking water for the communities that rely on Lake Okeechobee as a backup water supply, protect the environment and prevent economic devastation.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop followed by a long, horizontal stroke that tapers to the right.

Brian Mast
Member of Congress