

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 20, 2023

Colonel James Booth
Jacksonville District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207-8175

Dear Colonel Booth,

With the announcement today of Lake Okeechobee releases to the St. Lucie River Estuary, I write with tepid appreciation that the Army Corps is taking action to lower the lake before the wet season begins but with concern about the impact these discharges will have on the delicate ecosystem of the estuary. Discharges of 500 cubic feet per second (cfs) have minimal impact on the amount of water in Lake Okeechobee, even if the discharges are prolonged, but it has a massive impact on the East Coast's ecosystem, and therefore I call on you to use every outlet available to minimize the impact to the St. Lucie and to end discharges as soon as possible.

As I have emphasized every chance I get, any water flowing from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie River is unwanted. The fresh water is devastating to our brackish estuary, putting the diverse plant and animal species that call the St. Lucie "home" at risk. We've seen it play out time and time again – harm to our ecosystem means harm to our economy and to human health. Stopping flows east from Lake Okeechobee is imperative for the ecological, economic, and physical well-being of our community.

At a rate of 500 cfs, the St. Lucie will receive more than 2.25 billion gallons of water from Lake Okeechobee each week, all of it harmful to the estuary. There are other options the Corps must explore in order to spare the St. Lucie Estuary from harm. First of all, the Corps must be sure they are sending every drop of water they can south. Second, I am asking you to maximize flows to the water farms and other dispersed water management projects in the system. Finally, I would like to see as much water as possible be stored in the C-44 reservoir to delay toxic Lake Okeechobee water from reaching the S-80. It is vital that the system be maximized to protect the St. Lucie from receiving more flows than are absolutely necessary for preparing us for the wet season.

I am hoping that these releases show a commitment from you and your team to protect the St. Lucie from even more devastating lake releases this summer. We cannot get complacent this dry season, only to be caught flat-footed in the wet season and require additional releases after the St. Lucie has already taken billions of gallons of lake water. To put it plainly: if we are receiving releases now, releases this summer will be unacceptable. Every tool at your disposal should be used to prevent ecological disaster both now and as we get closer to June 1st.

Thank you for your partnership on this issue. I look forward to continued collaboration as we work to protect and restore the St. Lucie River.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small dot.

Brian Mast
Member of Congress