Written Testimony of
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The Florida Farm Bureau Federation is our state's largest agricultural organization with more than 142,000 members. Sixty county Farm Bureaus constitute the grassroots structure of our organization. We represent farm owners who produce all 300 of the state's agricultural commodities, regardless of their scope of operations or location.

Within the framework of our organization's policy, we fully support a holistic approach to Everglades restoration through the proper sequencing of projects that ultimately improves the timing, distribution, and quality of water moving throughout the Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades (KOE) system. We urge federal policymakers to do this by:

- Recognizing Florida agriculture's heritage of farming and stewardship;
- Recognizing KOE dependencies and constraints;
- Honoring the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) and the carefully crafted Integrated Delivery Schedule;
- Supporting all needed programs and partners, including Florida agriculture; and;
- Recognizing the rights of all legal water users including the environment.

Increased flow of water to the remnant Everglades is as important as balancing the water-related needs of the region, more specifically, enhancing water supply and water quality while maintaining flood protection. We continue to encourage water managers and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) to comply with CERP and the sequencing outlined in the Integrated Delivery Schedule and avoid

distractions that compromise the delivery of critical project components in this effort. Farmers and ranchers will continue to partner with state and federal agencies as they play an important and appropriate role in the restoration process. It is imperative Everglades restoration stay on target to implement the carefully sequenced plan to accomplish the needed benefits for the entire system, rather than allow regional initiatives to disrupt this carefully crafted plan.

I. Florida's Agricultural Heritage of Farming and Stewardship

Agriculture is a critical part of Florida's heritage and economy, playing the essential role of providing food, fiber and foliage in Florida, throughout the country and the world while exercising good stewardship. In fact, Florida's rich agricultural history dates back nearly 500 years.

Agriculture is Florida's second largest industry and a major economic driver for the state; notable, it is independent of visitors and population growth for its contributions. It provides 2.1 million jobs and over $7 billion in receipts to Florida. Agriculture in south Florida, more specifically the 16-county area of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), is diverse, producing many different commodities. Understandably, farmers and ranchers in south Florida, and statewide, oversee millions of acres of land managing nutrients and water through sound science and technology to protect the environment while maintaining production and economic viability.

The food production and environmental conservation supplied by farms is vital to this country during the late fall, winter and spring months. During these seasons, most of the country is unable to grow the fruits and vegetables needed to support the nutritional needs of and provide vital food security for our country. Contrary to what media regularly propagates, farmers in the Everglades Agriculture Area (EAA), south of Lake Okeechobee, are our largest suppliers of winter vegetables, growing sweet corn, beans, lettuces, cabbage, radishes, rice, and oriental vegetables, in addition to sugarcane.

The ever changing demographic of the populace in south Florida has also resulted in a lack of understanding of agriculture and the products and benefits that a healthy agricultural sector provides. To be fair, agriculture has struggled to communicate effectively with a population that is urban and unfamiliar with the rural parts of Florida. Consequently, the general public is likely to believe that agriculture is responsible for causing all the water related issues throughout the state because it occupies such a large part of the rural landscape and should therefore be responsible for addressing those issues. This viewpoint is especially prevalent in south Florida.

The fact is for several decades farmers in the EAA have been an integral part of the CERP process, helping to clean water from Lake Okeechobee as it passes through their farms. Most importantly, they continue to be part of the solution in Everglades restoration efforts.

II. Recognizing KOE Dependencies and Constraints

The Central and Southern Florida flood control system traces its beginnings to the 19th century with the support of federal and state policymakers of the time. The system was completed by the early 1970's, concluding with the channelization of the Kissimmee River, despite vocal opposition from Okeechobee basin ranchers. The flood control system completely altered the timing, distribution and quality of water throughout the entire Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades ecosystem. The region wide system of water management paved the way for growth and development across south Florida. When the system was completed, there were approximately 2 million people living in the 16-county region of the South Florida Water Management District. Today, almost 9 million people make south Florida their home, a threefold increase in population.

Lake Okeechobee is the "liquid heart" of water supply for south Florida and its water quality is of great concern to all stakeholders, agriculture and coastal residents alike. Drainage and flood control projects implemented in the early and middle part of the last century provided a conduit for nutrient loading in the lake as water and sediments moved quickly off the landscape by design. Water,

specifically floodwaters, were seen as a common enemy and treated accordingly. These nutrient-laden sediments, referred to colloquially as "legacy phosphorus," remain today in both Lake Okeechobee and in the watersheds of the Northern Everglades. The COE's engineering of the Kissimmee River greatly exacerbated sediment transfer to the lake. Due to the sandy soils and an underlying organic layer, legacy phosphorus from natural and anthropogenic sources continue to contribute to the nutrient enrichment of Lake Okeechobee through the flood control system now operated and maintained by SFWMD. During the initial design and construction of the flood control project, the COE continually alluded to the fact that water quality would suffer as a consequence of the drainage system.

As south Florida's population has grown, so has the number water resource-related initiatives that are driven by population growth, but directly affect agriculture. These initiatives include studies and legislative mandates to address sustainable growth, environmental protection and water management. Rulemaking on every level of government resulted in laws and rules addressing growth management, comprehensive planning, environmental conservation, water supply planning, and ever more restrictive standards for water use, water management, and land management.

Ironically, best management practices (BMPs) for farming and ranching, which started here as a voluntary grassroots effort by farmers and ranchers to foster practices that protect the land and water upon which their livelihoods depend, has now become a regulatory program administered by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). Each of these initiatives impact the way farms and ranches manage land and water resources and conduct their businesses.

III. Honoring CERP and the Carefully Crafted Integrated Delivery Schedule

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was authorized by Congress in 2000 as a plan to "restore, preserve, and protect the south Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region, including water supply and flood protection." The other water related needs of region

includes agriculture. Everglades restoration should be true to its implementation authority and proper sequencing as outlined in the Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS).

The IDS, shared in cost by the state of Florida and the federal government, provides a collaborative science based sequencing strategy for planning, designing and constructing projects based on ecosystem needs, benefits, costs and available funding. This is achieved by:

- Maximizing holistic benefits to the regional system as early as possible;
- Ensuring additional projects will be ready to continue progress on restoration; and,
- Maintaining consistency with project dependencies and constraints.

Agricultural BMPs complement these efforts and are continually evolving with sound science and technology to improve water quality and storage as new IDS projects come on line.

IV. Supporting all Needed Programs and Partners, Including Florida Agriculture

The state of Florida maintains a leadership and partnership role in conjunction with federal projects. For instance, the Florida legislature unanimously passed Senate Bill 712, recently signed by Governor Ron DeSantis also known as "The Clean Waterways Act". As a part of this legislation, agricultural farms and ranches are once again called upon to continue their partnership role to improve water quality through the implementation of best management practices (BMPs), collaborative water projects and research. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) Office of Agricultural Water Policy 2020 report, research efforts have expanded to include quantifying and demonstrating benefits from precision agriculture technologies to improve crop nutrient efficiencies and reduce fertilizer and irrigation application rates.

Agriculture's contributions and partnerships to Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs) and regional restoration projects largely go unnoticed by stakeholders. Agriculture has been and continues to be a cooperative partner with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to satisfy their responsibilities as a part of a BMAP. However, it should be noted that farmers and ranchers cannot do it alone, nor should they be expected to. There must be a collaborative and holistic approach for restoration efforts to be successful.

Farmers throughout the region of the SFWMD continue to aggressively implement BMPs to slow or eliminate the movement of stormwater, and its sediment load, from farms and ranches. In spite of their efforts, more recognition needs to be given to the farmer for these activities as focus remains on the in lake nutrient load.

For the past 20 years, the Farm Bureau Federation in partnership with FDACS and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has recognized farmers and ranchers through the County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship (CARES). The CARES program recognizes with signage those farmers and ranchers who have implemented BMPs and exhibited responsible environmental stewardship. There are more than 80 CARES recipients in the Lake Okeechobee Basin and more than 900 throughout the state.

Additionally, Florida Farm Bureau along with FDACS has also worked with The Nature Conservancy in the development of a 4Rs fertilizer certification program that's been incorporated into FDACS BMP manuals. This program mandates the efficient use of fertilizer by requiring applications be at the right rate, right time, right source and right place. Along with CARES, the 4Rs program support BMAP goals and are examples of agriculture's partnership and commitment to CERP.

For example, continued EAA agricultural production fits within the framework of the Everglades Restoration Programs and CERP in terms of water quality as well. EAA farmers have exceeded the state-mandated goal of reducing phosphorus going into the Everglades by 25% for the past 26 years, achieving more than a 55% reduction on an average annual basis.

Farmers north of the Lake in partnership with the SFWMD have implemented dispersed water management projects that hold water back on thousands of acres on farms and ranches that will:

- Provide valuable groundwater recharge for water supply;
- Improve water quality and rehydration of drained systems;
- Enhance plant and wildlife habitat; and,
- Help sustain the local economy by incentivizing landowners to provide greater environmental stewardship.

V. Recognizing the Rights of all Legal Water Users

The environment, agriculture, urban development, and people depend on Lake Okeechobee for part or all of their water supply, in addition to flood protection, navigation and recreation. The lake level is maintained daily by the COE using the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule 2008 (LORS2008). The LORS2008 regulation schedule was implemented by the COE in 2008 to facilitate the emergency rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee and protect surrounding populations until the work was done. This new regulation schedule lowered Lake Okeechobee's control elevation by one and half feet, which resulted in a reduction of available legal water supply from the lake to all its user groups, including the environment.

The schedule includes flexibility for the COE to operate the lake at higher lake stages towards the end of the summer rainy season in this tropical climate. Holding more water at this time of year both decreases the amount of water being released to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Estuaries ("to tide") and provides a vital water supply for the dry season for use by the environment and permitted water users.

Lake Okeechobee is an integral part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), providing flood protection, water supply, environmental enhancement, and recreation/navigation to all of south Florida including the remnant Everglades and Everglades National Park. As the dike rehabilitation nears completion, the Corps is developing a new Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM).

Because the Lake is a part of CERP, it is critical that the Water Savings Clause provided in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2000 remains part of the new LOSOM. The purpose of the Water Savings clause was to provide assurances to all water users including the environment that the same level of service as provided in WRDA 2000 and authorized in CERP would continue.
Therefore, any new regulation schedule must meet all the requirements of CERP and the Central and Southern Florida water management system, which includes the water supply for farmers and ranchers.

The Florida Farm Bureau Federation and its farmer and rancher members are staunch partners with local governments, water management districts, state and federal agencies in this massive restoration project and they are committed to the use of science-based BMPs. Sticking to the entire CERP plan with the proper sequencing of projects without deviation is paramount to the success of Everglades Restoration. Projects already designed to improve water quality, storage and the timing and distribution of water throughout the system should take precedent over sub-regional initiatives that would result in partisanship and delay. Disproportionately favoring any one component or one region over the ecosystem as a whole and the entire suite of projects needed to accomplish this effort would compromise the integrity of this time-honored process.

VI. Conclusion

The Florida Farm Bureau Federation's commitment, along with all private stakeholders and government partners, to environmental stewardship and conservation is evident and indicative of the Florida farmer's proactive leadership on water issues in the state through the decades. Our collective and united approach to these tough issues has paid dividends for the Florida resident in cleaning up our natural resources, preserving a safe and abundant water supply, and protecting the state's residents from the real and fragile threat of flooding. A collaborative process must continue if we are to address these ongoing challenges in a meaningful and effective way. Florida's farmers and ranchers welcome that continued conversation.