



Memorandum

TO: Chris Stahl, Florida State Clearinghouse

THROUGH: Edward C. Smith, Director *EC*
Office of Water Policy and Ecosystems Restoration

FROM: Inger Hansen
Office of Water Policy and Ecosystems Restoration

DATE: March 13, 2020

SUBJECT: Department of the Army, Jacksonville District Corps of Engineers —
Loxahatchee River Watershed Restoration Project (LRWRP) Integrated Project
Implementation Report (PIR) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in
Palm Beach and Martin Counties, Florida

SAI #: FL202002128839C

Summary:

On February 5, 2020, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) released the Loxahatchee River Watershed Restoration Project (LRWRP) Integrated Project Implementation Report (PIR) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) with a Draft Chiefs Report for public comment. The LRWRP is part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. The purpose of the LRWRP is to improve the quantity, quality, timing, and distribution of water flows to the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River and restore the hydrologic conditions and connectivity of wetlands and watersheds that form the historic headwaters of the river. The project area comprises approximately 753 square miles located in central and northern Palm Beach County and southern Martin County. The Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River is federally designated as a National Wild and Scenic River; and it has also been designated an Outstanding Florida Water, which warrants special protection.

The PIR identifies Alternative 5R as the Recommended Plan that includes new pump stations and canals, ditch plugs, new and modified culverts and weirs, and other measures to rehydrate over-drained areas of the watershed. Project components also include storage features to restore volume and seasonal timing of flows to the Northwest Fork, including a 9,500 acre-foot C-18W reservoir, and a four-well aquifer storage and recovery system on the Mecca Farms site. The Mecca Farms land was purchased by South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) from Palm Beach County to provide a replacement storage reservoir site to assist with the recovery of Loxahatchee River and achieve the required Minimum Flows and Levels (MFLs), part of a recovery plan for the River.

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Comments:

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (Department) continues to support the USACE and SFWMD in this project with the understanding that the USACE and SFWMD will undertake additional analysis during the design phase of the project to ensure adjacent properties are not impacted. The Department's support is based upon the merits of the project, the broad public and agency support, and the project's role in meeting the MFL obligations and the completion milestones for Restoration Strategies.

As noted in our prior comments on the Draft PIR, the LRWRP is consistent with the Department's restoration vision for Loxahatchee River and will significantly improve both wet season and dry season target flows, which are critical for restoration of the freshwater riverine floodplain forest and reversing saltwater intrusion within the tidal floodplain. In addition, the LRWRP provides a significant increase in water flow to the federally designated Wild and Scenic Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River, restores 17,000 acres of agricultural land back to wetlands, and improves an additional 9,500 acres of natural areas that were part of the historical Greater Everglades system.

The Department recommends that support for the authorization of LRWRP be made contingent upon the USACE finalizing its approval of the EAA Reservoir Project and prioritizing the C-18W Reservoir component of LRWRP concurrently. The Department recommends prioritization of the C-18W Reservoir component concurrently with the EAA Reservoir to meet the legal obligations of the MFL.

The Department is supportive of the Loxahatchee River Watershed Restoration Project and looks forward to continuing our partnership with USACE and SFWMD. Should you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Ed Cambeiro at (850) 245-3176.

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