April 3, 2026

Colonel Brandon Bowman
District Commander, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District
701 San Marco Blvd. Jacksonville, FL.

Mr. Drew Bartlett
Executive Director, South Florida Water Management District
3301 Gun Club Road West Palm Beach, FL

RE: Increased Flows to the Caloosahatchee Estuary

Dear Executive Director Bartlett and Colonel Bowman,

The Everglades Coalition is an alliance of nearly 60 organizations dedicated to protecting and restoring America's Everglades with a 12.2-million-constituent network of followers. Our members continually engage on issues impacting all parts of the greater Everglades system, including the Northern Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. We are writing to express our concern with the ongoing lack of sufficient fresh water to the Caloosahatchee Estuary through the S-79 structure and the concerning salinity imbalance resulting from these water management decisions. It is important to note as well, several additional portions of the Everglades system and stormwater treatment areas (STA's) have also been facing the ramifications of a drier than average season and the associated lack of available fresh water. A multitude of ecosystems and stakeholders in South Florida will continue to be negatively impacted from current water management decisions if existing flow schedules remain unchanged.

The Caloosahatchee River and Estuary (CRE) is a delicate system requiring a specific balance of both fresh and saline water. The ecosystems, wildlife and communities dependent on the CRE's health and productivity are directly impacted when this salinity regime is imbalanced. As this letter is drafted in April 2026, the Caloosahatchee Estuary has been receiving less fresh water than ecologically required for the health of the system since mid- October 2025. Prolonged, heightened salinity levels from this shortage continue to inflict damage that will take ecosystems within the estuary, as well as local economies, years to recover from. Maintaining the ecological balance of the CRE requires a highly specific salinity envelope, derived from the mix of surrounding saline waters and fresh water from the Caloosahatchee River and watershed. Species in these ecosystems require specific salinities for their survival, foraging and reproduction. Salinity tolerances for the Eastern oyster and tape grass are used in the RECOVER 2020 metrics to determine the necessary fresh water flows the CRE must receive to maintain overall health and productivity. Oysters and tape grass were designated as indicator species due to the ability to extrapolate the ecosystems' health as a whole based on their status. While harm to these species alone is of concern, their degradation also signals a chain of cascading ecological impacts. Oysters and tape grass provide critical habitat for many species, with reductions in fish and invertebrate populations as an anticipated result of stress and/ or harm to these habitats. Damage to these habitats will be felt by our local economies that are dependent on healthy ecosystems to thrive. The lack of optimum fresh water flows reduces viable habitat area for species with specific salinity tolerances, known as habitat compression. For vulnerable species such as juvenile fish this can force them to areas with higher rates of predation, decreasing population sizes, and ultimately impacting the population for years to come.

Often, high flows to the estuary garner sizable public attention due to the nutrient pollution, water discoloration and relationship to harmful algal blooms associated with large, managed releases

from Lake Okeechobee. These events are visible to the naked eye and impossible for residents and tourists to ignore. The influx of fresh water from receiving higher than optimum flows lowers salinities to harmful levels, causing harm to key indicator species and altering ecosystem dynamics. While the impacts of high flows present themselves clearly, a host of devastating consequences are also dealt to the CRE from the quieter, less visible threat of insufficient fresh water. In recent months, the CRE has suffered the impacts of freshwater flows much lower than optimum for ecological health of the system. The optimum flow envelope for maintaining healthy salinities in the CRE system is 750- 2,100 cubic feet per second at the S-79 structure, as clearly outlined by RECOVER 2020 metrics. When flows within this envelope are maintained, salinity tolerances for key indicator species are maintained as well.

Beginning in mid-October 2025, flows at S-79 began falling below the optimum flow envelope and salinities in the CRE started to rise. That trend has continued from October to the current time, with no planned flow schedule modifications announced. As of April 2, 2026, the 14- day moving average at S-79 has been below the bottom threshold of the optimum flow envelope (750 cfs) for **159 days**.

Measured salinities have consistently surpassed the suitable range for tape grass in the upper estuary and for oysters in the lower estuary. During this period, the 30-day moving average at S-79 consistently fell below the required Minimum Flow and (MFL) Level for the Caloosahatchee (457 cfs) for **109 days**. While there has been a slight reprieve on falling below this metric in past weeks, considerable harm to local ecosystems during that period is believed to have occurred. Flows falling below the MFL metric, and the associated rise in salinities, cause stress and harm to species that take years to recover from. Harm to indicator species, already visible through out-of-range salinity data, represent harm to the entire CRE ecosystem. That harm is not isolated to species within the estuary but reflects on surrounding communities and economies far into the future. Therefore, while Lake Okeechobee remains above the water shortage management band and precipitation forecasts remain variable, we respectfully ask for supplemental lake flows to be sent through the S-79 structure to maintain the required salinities in the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary. Management to boost flows at S-79 to a constant release schedule within the 750- 2,100 cfs envelope would make a substantial difference for local ecosystems while causing a minimal difference in lake levels. While a certain amount of ecological harm has already occurred, alterations to flows now can still have a considerable, positive impact on species and their habitat within the CRE. For the protection of the Caloosahatchee estuary and the communities directly dependent on its health, we ask you to thoughtfully consider this request.

Sincerely,

Matt DePaolis
Environmental Policy Director
Sanibel- Captiva Conservation Foundation

Tammy Ash
Senior Water Policy Advisor
Conservancy of Southwest Florida

Janet Windisch
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