



Jacksonville District Corps of Engineers
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207-8175

September 19, 2019

Dear Col. Andrew Kelly,

In response to a request for public comment regarding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' plan to deviate from the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule 2008 (LORS 08), we would like to express our concern over any plans that would stray from the existing lake regulation schedule and result in lower lake levels annually. Consistently lowering the Lake negatively affects boating, fishing, recreation and the ability to safely navigate in the Lake.

As we witnessed during the summer of 2019, a lower Lake Okeechobee threatens the safety of amateur and professional tournament fisherman by creating significant challenges with navigation around the lake. Our broad coalition of individuals, advocacy organizations and companies have an interest in promoting boater and fishermen safety on Lake Okeechobee. Unfortunately, in one instance this year, a group of young, amateur anglers were stranded on the lower lake late into the night due to issues with navigation, putting their lives at serious risk.

Unfortunately, the proposed actions by the Army Corps to lower the lake outside normal operations only further threatens the safety of many in our fishing and boating community.

As you are aware, LORS 08 was developed with input from the lake's ecologists and fishermen, among other stakeholders, who know it best. Any attempt to lower Lake Okeechobee in an unnatural fashion as envisioned by the planned deviation would threaten the lake's fragile ecosystem. For example, we have seen during droughts such as in 2011 when the lake's aquatic vegetation died off and fish habitat was threatened. While this may occur during a naturally-occurring drought on occasion, for the Army Corps to initiate such a drought on an annual basis would threaten the lake's health in a major way. The Corps' plan to lower the Lake hurts our industry, our livelihood, and our future on the Lake.

We agree with environmental experts who believe Lake Okeechobee levels between 15.5 to 12.5 are best for the health of the lake. The planned deviation under consideration would threaten the lake's health by purposefully lowering the Lake well beyond the 12.5, instead of following the existing, publicly-approved schedule. When the lake reaches these extremes lows, it may have only inches of water in places, making fishing and boating virtually impossible. Simply put, it would turn the lake we love into a mud hole.

It is important to remember that Lake Okeechobee is a global destination for fishing. For many, fishing for bass on the second largest freshwater lake within the continental United States is a bucket list item. We want this lake to be there for fisherman from around the world for generations to come.

On behalf of the tens of thousands of anglers who fish on Lake Okeechobee every year, we urge you to reconsider this ill-advised plan and listen to those who know the lake best, and return to the normal range of Lake operations that balances all of our needs.

Thank you for considering these comments on the draft planned deviation and please add this public comment letter to the deviation's administrative record.

Sincerely,

Ramon Iglesias, Co-Founder/Anglers for Lake Okeechobee

Cc: Major General Diana Holland, USACE
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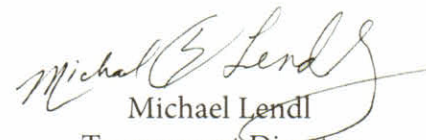
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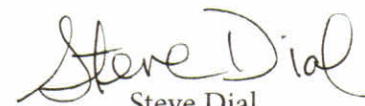
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