



CTA-192-Water Is Life!-Florida Keys

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Keys to Corps: 'Water is life'

By Kevin Wadlow Free Press Staff March 27, 2019



KEVIN WADLOW/Free Press Upper Keys fishing guide Steve Thomas stresses the need for more fresh water coming to Florida Bay in a conservation with Lt. Col. Jennifer A. Reynolds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deputy district commander for South Florida.

MARATHON — Florida Keys fishing guides, scientists and residents hammered

one point repeatedly at a March 20 meeting with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers staff: Florida Bay needs more fresh water, and soon.

"We just need more water coming," Islamorada guide Dave Denkert said. "It used to be you could see water flowing out of the Everglades throughout the year. Now there is no flow and a big decline in the fishing. It's sad, very sad."

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KEVIN WADLOW/Free Press
Democratic U.S. Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell tells a March 20 gathering in Marathon that protecting Florida Bay and the Everglades system ranks among her top priorities for her South Florida district that includes the Florida Keys. Stories of once-clear waters choked with algae, canceled fishing trips, and threats to the offshore coral reef literally moved Islamorada Village Councilwoman Cheryl Meads, newly appointed to the South Florida Water Management District, to tears.

“I’m sitting on the front row, crying,” Meads said. “I want to meet with the fishermen and scientists and learn from you.”

U.S. Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, D-Fla., who represents the Florida Keys, opened the comment session with the Corps by telling the staff, “To this community, water is life. We literally cannot live without it. And it is one of my top priorities as the congresswoman for this district.”

Mucarsel-Powell petitioned the Corps to add another comment session for the Keys on the ongoing update to the Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual, which outlines how the complex system of manmade waterways and storage areas works to prevent flooding, provide potable water and attempts to restore the natural Everglades ecosystem that includes Florida Bay.

“Our residents directly rely on the management of Lake Okeechobee for dry and wet season flows to Florida Bay,” Mucarsel-Powell said. “Without sufficient dry and wet season flows to Florida Bay, our local environment suffers catastrophic harm.”

Most of the speakers at the Marathon Government Center put aside specific recommendations for managing Lake Okeechobee and the water system that begins more than 200 miles upstate. They used their time to stress a dire need for more fresh water to bring Florida Bay back to its historically brackish state.



“The water comes out hypersaline, even out to the reef,” Keys Marine Laboratory staff scientist Tom Barlett said. “It’s not just in Florida Bay.”

KEVIN WADLOW/Free Press
Islamorada resident Cheryl Meads, right, newly named to the South Florida Water Management District board, speaks about Florida Bay’s water

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woes with Richard Trotta of the Herman Lucerne Memorial Foundation; Ross Boucek of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust's Keys Initiative; and Keys Marine Laboratory deputy director Cindy Lewis.

"All that water winds up on the coral reef, which is unprecedented" and puts the reef in peril, lab deputy director Cindy Lewis agreed.

Tavernier guide Fred Ferreira detailed the loss of regular clients who abandoned Upper Keys waters to seek better fishing elsewhere. That costs professional captains, hotels and restaurants dearly, he said. "Imagine our fear of not being able to maintain our way of life," he said.

"Last year was the worst we've ever seen," guide Dale Perez said. "The water was solid green, full of algae. ... This has got to stop. We've got to do something and got to do something now."

Guide Richard Grathwohl said a lack of pink shrimp causes Florida Bay bonefish and other sportfish to leave bay flats and head farther into the Gulf of Mexico.

"If we don't get the water straightened out, it's all going to collapse," he said. "We've had study after study. Now it's time to get going."

Losing about half the fresh water that the bay needs causes a spike in salinity that "is basically lethal to everything but brine shrimp," said Ross Boucek of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust. Algae blooms likely caused by the bay's water imbalance kill sponges.

"When you lose a third of the habitat for fish that supports our economy, its going to have a negative effect," he said.

Lt. Col. Jennifer Reynolds, the Army Corps of Engineers deputy director for South Florida, said the agency recognizes the link between Lake Okeechobee and Florida Bay.

"The bulk of the system has to do with how we're flowing water out of the lake and into water conservation areas," she said. "This area is farther north but absolutely impacts how water is made available to this part of the system."

"Sometimes we struggle with the rest of state understanding how complex this system is," she said. "You guys understand how this affects you."

The first draft of an update to the Lake Okeechobee operating manual likely will be finished in the spring of 2022, a Corps manager said.

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