



**ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
TUESDAY, JANUARY 13, 2026 – 10:00 AM
2379 BROAD STREET, BROOKSVILLE, FLORIDA 34604**

MINUTES

Committee Members Present

Jennifer Hecker – Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership
Jennifer Brunty – Manatee County Chamber of Commerce
Kathleen Castor – Manatee County Chamber of Commerce (alternate)
Dwayne Carlton – The Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership
Ryan Gandy – Sarasota Bay Estuary Program
Gordon Colvin – Save the Homosassa River Alliance
Sid Flannery – Sierra Club – Tampa Bay Group
Mary Willa Matz – Sierra Club – Tampa Bay Group (alternate)
Ed Sherwood – Tampa Bay Estuary Program

Interested Parties

Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon – FDACS

Board Administrative Support

Virginia Singer
Barbara Matrone

Governing Board Liaison

Joshua Gamblin

1. Call to Order and Introductions

The Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) of the Southwest Florida Water Management District (District) met for its regular meeting at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, January 13, 2026, via Microsoft Teams.

Chair Ed Sherwood called the meeting to order, and attendance was called.

Governing Board Liaison Joshua Gamblin welcomed the committee.

2. Additions and Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Approval of October 14, 2025, Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the draft minutes from October 14, 2025, with modifications. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None.

5. Certificate of Appreciation for Dave Tomasko

Chair Sherwood presented an award and recognized Dave Tomasko for his contributions to the EAC from 2021 through 2025.

6. Hydrologic Conditions Update

Steve DeSmith, P.G., Senior Professional Geologist, provided a hydrologic conditions update. He noted that January is the fourth month of the District's eight-month dry season. Rainfall during the early part of the dry season has remained below average. In the month of October, the District received 1.6 inches of rainfall, resulting in a 1.4-inch rainfall deficit compared to the historic 3.0-inch average. Rainfall totals for October ranged from a high of 7.7 inches in Hernando County to a low of 0.05 inches in Manatee County. In November, the District received only 0.2 inches of rainfall, which is a 1.7-inch deficit from the historic average of 1.9 inches. December rainfall also remained below average, with 1.6 inches of rainfall, representing a 0.6-inch deficit from the historic average of 2.2-inches.

The 12-month rainfall distribution from January 2025 to December 2025 averaged 39.9 inches, representing a 12.7-inch deficit compared to the historic average of 52.7 inches. A graph of the 12-month rainfall departure from average showed multiple periods of surplus or deficit rainfall since 1998. The 12-month period ending in December 2025 reflected a 12.7-inch deficit. Prior to that in December 2024, the District had a 5.4-inch surplus. Preliminary data for January indicate that the District has received just over 0.3 inches of rainfall to date. As a result, the District is currently experiencing an approximate 2-inch rainfall deficit for the month of January.

Mr. DeSmith then discussed recent groundwater levels in the northern, central and southern counties, as well as surface water levels in the Northern Lakes, Tampa Bay Lakes, Polk Upland Lakes and Lake Wales Ridge Lakes regions. He showed another set of graphs and discussed the eight-week mean discharge of the Withlacoochee, Hillsborough, Alafia and Peace rivers. He also discussed public supply volumes for the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply and the Tampa Bay area.

Mr. DeSmith concluded his presentation by reviewing the near-term climate forecast and showed seasonal outlooks for temperature and precipitation for the period from January through March 2026. According to the Climate Prediction Center, the District is expected to experience below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures through March. Extended climate forecasts indicate that below-normal precipitation is likely to persist through mid-spring, with rainfall conditions returning to near normal by early summer. The upcoming rainy season is forecast to have above-normal rainfall. Current Pacific Ocean conditions are characterized by La Niña, which typically brings warmer and drier weather to the region. These conditions are expected to transition to neutral by the end of spring.

Chair Sherwood asked whether the period of record low shown on the lake graphs represented an average across all lakes or the lowest observed level among the lakes in the region. Mr. DeSmith responded that the period of record low shown in the four different graphs reflects a composite water level derived from a select set of lakes located within each lake region. As an example, he noted that the Lake Wales Ridge region uses water levels from nine lakes for its composite period of record low water level.

7. Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Mapping in First-Magnitude Springs

Madison Trowbridge, Ph.D., Springs Scientist, gave a presentation on submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) mapping in first-magnitude springs. First-magnitude springs are the largest category of springs, defined by a discharge of more than 64.6 million gallons per day. The District conducts SAV mapping on all five first-magnitude springs within its boundaries: Weeki Wachee River, Chassahowitzka River, Homosassa River, Crystal River/Kings Bay and Rainbow River.

The District maps SAV at specified locations, known as transects, throughout each river and Kings Bay, visiting these sites twice a year in summer and winter. This detailed approach allows staff to assess not only overall SAV abundance, but also species-specific patterns, providing powerful data that can be leveraged for deeper analysis and management decisions. Five quadrats are placed at fixed positions across the channel to capture vegetation conditions. This transect-based approach captures variability across the river, while in Kings Bay quadrats are deployed around a fixed point to account for its bay setting and ensure robust data collection.

Dr. Trowbridge displayed the most common species found in coastal springs, noting that species composition provides important insight into system conditions and that understanding these species can help inform and guide management actions. For each quadrat, the percent coverage of SAV is estimated, both overall and by individual species. This approach shows not only what species are present and their relative abundance but is complemented by biomass measurements to further quantify SAV.

Dr. Trowbridge outlined the parameters included in data collection, noting that photos of each quadrat and videos along each transect are taken to document system conditions during sampling. She also discussed how the data are analyzed and used to improve understanding of spring systems.

Salinity thresholds were evaluated alongside macroalgae and SAV data to identify regions where specific SAV communities are expected, resulting in three river zones: tidal freshwater, transition and estuarine. This model helps identify expected ecological communities to inform management actions and provides a baseline for tracking changes over time due to sea-level rise, climate change and storm impacts. Although it is developed for the Chassahowitzka River, it has been applied to other coastal spring systems. Current literature largely focuses on SAV salinity tolerance, with limited information available on post-exposure recovery following prolonged high-salinity events.

Dr. Trowbridge discussed the impacts of Hurricanes Milton, Idalia and Helene on the Springs Coast, noting that data did not indicate SAV impacts from reverse surge. Although the storms pushed Gulf waters into coastal springs causing flooding and elevated salinity, the most significant changes were observed in Crystal River/Kings Bay, which was the primary focus of the analysis. After Hurricane Idalia, the system did not immediately return to pre-storm conditions; instead, it underwent ecological succession over several months. Ecological succession describes how a community changes following a disturbance, such as a storm or a forest fire.

Dr. Trowbridge concluded her presentation by sharing the website to access data and resources: <http://watermatters.org/springs> which provides United States Geological Survey (USGS) gauge readings, photos and videos, spring information, Surface Water Improvement and Management Plans and environmental monitoring reports. Each spring's report includes water quality, hydrologic data and SAV monitoring results.

Mr. Sid Flannery inquired whether the District would consider sending periphyton samples to a contractor for species identification. Dr. Trowbridge responded that the Department of Environmental Protection's bio-assessment team is currently looking at springs and is quantifying the periphyton on the SAV. Mr. Flannery also asked about supplemental feedings for manatees in Kings Bay. Dr. Trowbridge responded that she was not aware of any current plans but that she does provide Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission with data on existing conditions.

Chair Sherwood asked about co-stressors of salinity and nutrients after the hurricanes, and projections for recovery based on nutrient trends. Dr. Trowbridge said that it was being evaluated, noting that Kings Bay is near the threshold for meeting total numeric nutrient criteria and that nutrient levels remained consistent with past observations following the storms.

Mr. Dwayne Carlton asked about the Boater Freedom Act and its potential effects on spring systems. Dr. Trowbridge responded that the District's long-term monitoring programs allow changes to be tracked over time, and that the results can be shared with Springs Coast committees.

8. Development of Agenda Topics

Mr. Flannery requested the opportunity to give a presentation on lower minimum flows in the lower Hillsborough River at the April meeting. He also inquired about the status of the District's cooperative data collection program with the USGS and asked whether the District could provide a list of USGS stations that have been discontinued in the current fiscal year. Mr. Joey Fogel agreed to compile and

share the list with the EAC and provided a summary of the USGS process. A formal presentation may be requested later if the EAC has additional questions.

9. Announcements and Other Business

Chair Sherwood mentioned that the Tampa Bay Estuary Program has announced the release of the Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration fund request for proposals. Submissions are due electronically by March 25, 2026, and funding is available.

10. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:11 a.m.