

ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING TUESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2025 – 10:00 AM 2379 BROAD STREET, BROOKSVILLE, FLORIDA 34604

MINUTES

<u>Committee Members Present</u> Jennifer Hecker – Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership Becky Ayech – Environmental Confederation of SW Florida Kathleen Castor – Manatee Chamber of Commerce – alternate Dwayne Carlton – The Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership Dave Tomasko – Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Ryan Gandy – Sarasota Bay Estuary Program - alternate 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

<u>Governing Board Liaison</u> John Mitten

Staff Members Adrienne Vining Bob Thompson Brian Starford Candice Harris Chris Anastasiou Chris Zajac Cliff Ondercin Danielle Rogers Devon Villareal Gabe Herrick Garrett Snider Jay Hoecker Jennette Seachrist Jeremy McKay Jerry Harding Jill Qi Jordan Miller Kristina Deak Kym Holzwart Lei Yang Lizanne Garcia Madison Frazier Madison Trowbridge Mandi Rice Melissa Gulvin Michelle Weaver Randy Smith Robyn Felix Tammy Plazak Tom Hyle Vivianna Bendixson

Board Administrative Support Virginia Singer Barbara Matrone

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 14, 2025, via Microsoft Teams.

Chair Dave Tomasko called the meeting to order, and attendance was called.

Governing Board Liaison John Mitten welcomed the committee.

2. Additions and Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Approval of the July 9, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Mr. Sid Flannery requested a revision to the draft minutes from the July 9, 2024, meeting. A motion was made to approve the draft minutes with the revision. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None.

5. Upper Peace River MFL Reevaluation Update

Dr. Lei Yang, Chief Professional Engineer, provided a presentation on the District's approach to setting minimum flows on the upper Peace River. Dr. Yang began by reviewing background on the existing upper Peace River minimum flows and then introduced the District's habitat-based approach to setting minimum flows for the upper Peace River. She focused on its major steps including baseline flow development, flow-based blocks, technical methods applied to each of these flow blocks to come up with minimum flow recommendation for three USGS gauging stations at Bartow, Fort Meade and Zolfo Springs on the upper Peace River.

Dr. Yang also explained the utilization of a percent-of-flow reduction approach and 15% change criteria for significant harm. She emphasized that the Water Resource Implementation Rule identifies 10 environmental resource values that must be evaluated as part of the minimum flow development. Subsequently, Dr. Yang summarized past District-funded efforts to support the minimum flow development on the upper Peace, including topographic LiDAR survey, river bathymetry survey, data collection for instream and woody habitat analyses, water quality data compilation and analysis, benthic macroinvertebrate and fish studies by various parties, and model development for Peace River integrated model and HEC-RAS.

In conclusion, Dr. Yang discussed a tentative schedule for the upcoming activities related to the upper Peace River minimum flow development, mainly for stakeholder outreach, Governing Board meetings, peer review, presentation plans and rulemaking.

Mr. Sid Flannery asked if the Peace River integrated model accounted for physical alterations as well as changing groundwater withdrawal effects. Dr. Yang replied that she believed it did account for physical alterations. Mr. Flannery also suggested that long-term hydrographs be presented for yearly streamflow parameters for low, medium, and high flows at the various gauges.

Mr. Ed Sherwood asked if the lines at the three gaging stations represented the median outputs from the model. Dr. Yang responded that the time period from 1975 through 2022 was used as the baseline period. They are still in the process of minimum flow development but in the future, they will be able to show specific flows associated with blocks one, two and three.

Mr. Randy Smith mentioned that later this summer the first draft of the report would be going to the Governing Board before they kick off the peer review process. He encouraged the EAC members to engage in the public peer review process if they are interested in technical details.

6. Lake Tarpon Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Plan Update

Dr. Chris Anastasiou, Chief Water Quality Scientist, provided a Lake Tarpon Surface Water Improvement and Management SWIM plan update. The SWIM program was established in 1987 and was part of the SWIM Act which requires water management districts to develop and manage a list of priority water bodies with regional or statewide significance which require restoration or protection. Each water management district was directed to develop a priority waterbody list that is approved by FDEP. The District currently has 12 SWIM priority waterbodies, and this list is reviewed every five years. Each priority waterbody is required to have a SWIM plan which is the SWIM Program's guiding document used to highlight issues and drivers, identify management actions, and develop projects and initiatives. These plans are also used to guide research designed to improve our scientific understanding of the causes and effects of degraded water quality and impacted natural systems. The first SWIM plan for Lake Tarpon was completed in 1989 and focused on diagnostic feasibility studies to determine the causes of what was perceived at the time as degraded water quality.

Lake Tarpon continues to be a regionally significant natural and outdoor recreational resource. At approximately 2,500 acres it is the largest lake in Pinellas County and continues to be a top 10 bass fishing lake in the state of Florida. The last update of the Lake Tarpon SWIM plan was completed in 2001, and management actions were recommended to achieve desirable water quality conditions since the late 1980s and early 1990s. These actions included lake level drawdowns, enhanced stormwater treatment projects, monitoring and management of submerged and emergent aquatic habitats, and other natural system restoration projects.

Over the 20 plus years since the last SWIM Plan update, the District's understanding of how Lake Tarpon functions and the best way to effectively manage the lake has evolved, thanks to the District's many partners including Pinellas County. Today, Lake Tarpon supports a robust submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) community with over 90% of the SAV species being native and desirable. This was made possible by maintaining higher lake levels and, where practicable, minimizing lake level fluctuations. The higher water levels prevent nuisance aquatic species, primarily hydrilla, from gaining a foothold in deeper areas during low lake level periods. Additionally, having a proactive nuisance aquatic vegetation management plan has also been integral in helping control the spread of invasive species like hydrilla. Management actions in Lake Tarpon since the last SWIM Plan update have focused on maintaining healthy aquatic vegetation which is directly linked to good water quality, and healthy fish populations.

Because Lake Tarpon is a healthy lake, this Lake Tarpon SWIM Plan update takes a "hold the line" approach to managing this waterbody. Of course, holding the line does not mean do nothing. In fact, the SWIM Plan outlines several goals and management actions designed to ensure Lake Tarpon remains one of the 10 best bass fishing lakes in Florida. The plan focuses on the areas of water quality and natural systems (habitat). For each of these focus areas, the plan identifies management actions, projects, and initiatives centered around (1) protection & restoration, (2) monitoring & research, and (3) education & outreach. The two water quality goals are to (1) maintain water quality conditions and to (2) hold the line on nutrient loads. The natural systems goals are to maintain water elevations in Lake Tarpon where practical, work with partners to restore hydrologic function of wetlands on conservation lands, and to support actions to maintain a healthy aquatic plant community that improves the lake vegetation index, an index of emergent vegetation quality.

Dr. Anastasiou concluded by reviewing the schedule for completing the update of the Lake Tarpon SWIM plan. Technical stakeholders' meetings and coordination with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection have been completed to develop the draft plan. The Final Lake Tarpon SWIM Plan will be provided to the Governing Board at its meeting in May 2025. The reviewers have 45 days to provide comments and then the Governing Board will approve the final plan at its meeting in September 2025.

7. Development of Agenda Topics

Ms. Becky Ayech requested a Flatford Swamp update. Chair Tomasko requested Seagrass Mapping results.

8. Announcements and Other Business

Mr. Flannery commended the District on the amazing work they have done on the upper Peace River. He encouraged the District to be cautious with the approach being taken to the upper Peace River and asked that they discuss the alterations to the watershed in their report. Ms. Ayech reported that the Myakka River Management Council voted to have Sarasota County implement ordinances that would address light pollution in the Myakka River watershed in Sarasota County. This would address light pollution not only towards the earth but also the pollution of light moving upward.

9. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:40 a.m.