



**SOUTHWEST FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2026 – 10:00 AM
MINUTES**

Committee Members

Jennifer Hecker – Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership
Becky Ayech – Environmental Confederation of Southwest Florida
Lauren Doing – 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

Governing Board Liaison

Joshua Gamblin

Board Administrative Support

Virginia Singer
Barbara Matrone

Interested Parties

Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon, FDACS
Mark Alderson
Christina Sowers
Laurie Banner
Paul Semenec
Phil Compton
Rich Brown
Rory Jones
Sarah Burns

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, April 14, 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 January 13, 2026, Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the draft minutes from the January 13, 2026 meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None

5. Hydrologic Conditions Update

Steve DeSmith, P.G., Senior Professional Geologist, provided an update on current hydrologic conditions. He reported that the District has recently experienced dry conditions due to below-average rainfall. April marks the seventh month of the District's eight-month dry season (October through May). Rainfall has generally remained below average since Hurricane Milton 14 months ago, with May 2025 being the only month during that period to record above-average precipitation. In February, the District received 1.6 inches of rainfall, reflecting a 1.1-inch deficit compared to the historical average of 2.7 inches. Rainfall totals across the District ranged from 4.5 inches in Levy County to 0.4 inches in Charlotte County. In March, the District recorded 2.5 inches of rainfall, representing a 0.7-inch deficit from the historical average of 3.2 inches.

The 12-month rainfall distribution from March 2025 to February 2026 averaged 38.9 inches, representing a 13.7-inch deficit compared to the historic average of 52.6 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 February 2026 reflected a 13.7-inch deficit, compared to a 2.6-inch surplus during the same period ending February 2025. Provisional rainfall data through April 9 remains below average; however, with several weeks remaining in the month, conditions may improve.

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 with a review of the near-term climate forecast, including seasonal outlooks for temperature and precipitation for the period of April through June 2026. According to the Climate Prediction Center, the District is expected to experience below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures through June. Extended climate forecasts indicate a likelihood of above-normal rainfall persisting into mid-summer, followed by below-normal rainfall conditions in the fall. The District declared a Modified Phase III Water Shortage, which will remain in effect through July 1, 2026.

Mr. Mark Alderson inquired about the normal range of the aquifer, how that range was established, and current conditions relative to that range within the Southern Water Use Caution Area (SWUCA). Mr. DeSmith responded that he was uncertain regarding conditions within the SWUCA, noting that its boundaries differ from the six-county composite the District uses to assess aquifer levels in the southern region. He explained that the normal range is defined between the 25th and 75th percentiles; so, at the 37th percentile, the regional aquifer level remains within the normal range, though at the lower end.

Ms. Becky Ayech asked which counties were included in the southern region. Mr. DeSmith responded that the southern counties consisted of Sarasota, Manatee, Hardee, DeSoto, Charlotte, and Highlands. Ms. Ayech then inquired whether the presentation reflected water levels from the upper Floridan aquifer system. Mr. DeSmith confirmed that the groundwater graphs did represent the upper Floridan aquifer. Ms. Ayech further asked why average water levels for the intermediate aquifer were not presented, given that many wells are drilled into the intermediate aquifer and withdrawn from the Floridan aquifer. Mr. DeSmith responded that the District previously included those data many years ago; however, about 15 years ago it was decided to focus on the upper Floridan aquifer, as it is the most productive and most widely used.

Ms. Ayech made a motion to direct staff to consult with the Executive Director regarding the inclusion of intermediate aquifer water level data in future presentations, particularly for the southern region, and to also incorporate surficial aquifer level data. Ms. Jennifer Hecker seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

6. Use of Available Rainfall Data in the Environmental Resource Permit Process

David Kramer, Environmental Resource Permit Bureau Chief, presented the use of available rainfall data and its application in the Environmental Resource Permitting (ERP) process. The ERP water quantity criteria is a key component of the ERP program. ERP applicants must provide reasonable assurance that proposed construction, alteration, operation, maintenance, removal, or abandonment of regulated works or other activities will not cause adverse water quantity impacts to receiving waters or adjacent lands; result in adverse flooding to onsite or offsite property; negatively affect existing surface water storage or conveyance capabilities; or adversely impact the maintenance of surface water or groundwater levels necessary to support surface water flows. Offsite discharges must be limited to amounts that do not cause adverse offsite impacts.

Mr. Kramer further explained that the Applicant's Handbook specifies that offsite discharge peak stages for existing and developed conditions are to be computed using the District's 24-hour, 25-year rainfall maps, the Natural Resources Conservation Service Type II Florida Modified 24-hour rainfall distribution, and Antecedent Moisture Condition (AMC) II conditions. He added that the 24-hour, 100-year storm event is used to determine the 100-year flood elevation. He also noted that it is not required to account for storm events less frequent than the 25-year event for rate of discharge in an open basin, or less frequent than the 100-year event for volume of discharge in a closed basin.

Mr. Kramer then discussed flexibility in design criteria. The criteria contained in the Applicant's Handbook, Volume II, were established with a primary goal of meeting the District's water resource objectives as set forth in Chapter 373, Florida Statutes. While performance-based criteria are used wherever possible, the standards set forth in Volume II are designed to be flexible. Alternative methods of meeting the overall objectives and the ERP conditions for issuance will be considered depending on the magnitude of specific or cumulative impacts. Applicants must provide reasonable assurance in the form of plans, test results, or other supporting information to demonstrate that the alternative design meets the conditions for permit issuance.

Mr. Kramer concluded by discussing limitations and practical considerations related to rainfall data and ERP criteria. The District's 24-hour, 25-year rainfall maps are both highly protective and representative, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) rainfall data are generally consistent with the District's data and acceptable for use. He noted that revising criteria and updating the Applicant's Handbook would likely require statewide coordination and consistency. The District strives to ensure that any ERP-related changes are aligned and consistent with other programs and efforts, including those of the Engineering and Project Management Bureau, which plays a significant role in funding and development of District flood studies and watershed management plans. Mr. Kramer further explained that there is no measurable benefit or difference in ERP outcomes when using NOAA rainfall data. He added that ERP designs using higher rainfall would still have discharged downstream, and that much of the severe flooding occurred east of Interstate 75 in Sarasota County. Rainfall totals associated with storms such as Debby and Milton significantly exceeded the 100-year, 24-hour rainfall depths predicted by both the District's rainfall maps and NOAA data. Water quality-related ERP rule making and implementation have been a priority of the water management districts and Florida Department of Environmental Protection since 2020.

Ms. Ayech requested clarification on the distinction between open and closed basins. Mr. Kramer explained that a closed basin is a local watershed that drains to a low point without an outlet and does not discharge overland to another system. Ms. Ayech also inquired about how fill or obstructions that alter sheet flow, such as when flow is redirected around a barrier, are addressed. Mr. Kramer responded that maintaining natural flow patterns is a key consideration in every ERP permitting process. He noted that applicants are required to account for such conditions by

accommodating existing flows, either by accepting the flow or providing appropriate routing to convey it around the obstruction.

Chair Sherwood inquired whether observed long-term trends in 25-year and 100-year storm events, at both the District and statewide water management district levels, would prompt consideration of updates to current criteria. Mr. Kramer responded that such trends would be considered.

7. Historical Development of the Minimum Flows for the Lower Hillsborough River in Relation to Salinity in the Lower River and Sulphur Springs

Sid Flannery, Sierra Club – Tampa Bay Group, presented on the history of the establishment of minimum flows for the lower Hillsborough River in relation to salinity in the lower river and Sulphur Springs. Mr. Flannery explained the history, science, and policy behind minimum flows for the lower Hillsborough River and described the findings of the first minimum flows report published in 1999, as well as the reevaluation of the minimum flows that was published in 2006. He discussed the hydrology of the system, including the Hillsborough River Dam, Sulphur Springs, and the Tampa Bypass Canal, and described how decades of water withdrawals created long periods of “no-flow days” downstream of the dam. Mr. Flannery detailed how modeling, particularly the Laterally Averaged Model for Estuaries (LAMFE) estuarine model, demonstrated the ecological importance of maintaining a salinity gradient and a freshwater refuge below the dam, which led to the establishment of minimum flow requirements beginning in 1999 and refined in 2006. He noted that even small minimum flows can significantly reduce salinity near the dam, which is a key finding that shaped the rule.

In 2007, following the scientific panel’s review, the District adopted minimum flows for the lower Hillsborough River of 20 cubic feet per second (cfs) freshwater equivalent (July–March) and 24 cfs (April–June). When alternative sources such as Sulphur Springs are used, the combined flow must create volumes of water below five parts per thousand salinity comparable to releasing those freshwater amounts at the dam.

Mr. Flannery then discussed the quantities of water that have become available over time to provide minimum flows to the lower Hillsborough River, including Sulphur Springs, Blue Sink, the Tampa Bypass Canal, and Morris Bridge Sink, the last of which has not been implemented. Mr. Flannery highlighted that the City of Tampa only began consistently meeting the required freshwater equivalent minimum flows in 2023. He also emphasized the growing problem of rising salinity in Sulphur Springs since 2012, when greater amounts of spring water were routed to the base of the dam. He stated that the increase in salinity was linked to the lowering of water levels in the spring pool, which resulted from greater pumpage rates from the spring to provide greater minimum flows to the lower Hillsborough River. Mr. Flannery cited research showing that these water-level changes alter groundwater flow paths, water quality, and microbial communities within the spring system.

Mr. Flannery made a motion to recommend immediate stabilization of Sulphur Springs’ water level to its natural full stage near seven feet as soon as possible. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

Mr. Flannery made a second motion for the District to rerun the original 20 and 24 cfs freshwater LAMFE model scenarios, along with the Zephyrhills low-flow adjustment to evaluate how rising spring salinity is affecting the effectiveness of the minimum flow rule. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

8. Development of Agenda Topics

Chair Sherwood requested an update on impacted areas in Dover/Plant City area due to drought conditions and recent freeze events. Ms. Ayech requested an update on Flatford Swamp. Mr. Flannery mentioned an interest in the Florida Wildlife Corridor that runs through the Green Swamp in Hillsborough County.

9. Announcements and Other Business

Mr. Flannery reported that the District has released a draft minimum flows report for the upper Peace River and has conducted four scientific peer review meetings to date, with an additional meeting scheduled for Friday. He noted that the minimum flows are currently not being met at the upper Peace River at the Ft. Meade gauge. Mr. Flannery stated that he intends to speak at the upcoming peer review meeting and will be submitting a new document for consideration. Mr. Smith added that the District plans to provide a presentation on minimum flows at the July EAC meeting prior to bringing the item before the Governing Board for approval.

10. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.