



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

Committee Members

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

Governing Board Liaison

Joshua Gamblin

Interested Parties

Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon – FDACS
Blake Simmons - TBEP

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, July 14, 2026, via Microsoft Teams.

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

Governing Board Liaison Joshua Gamblin welcomed the committee.

2. Additions and Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Approval of April 14, 2026, Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the draft minutes from the April 14, 2026 meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None.

5. Tampa Bay Estuary Program Baywide Survey

Dr. Blake Simmons, Environmental Social Scientist with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, summarized results from the Baywide Satisfaction Survey conducted earlier in the year. He noted that the survey was created to collect input from residents throughout the Tampa Bay watershed to get feedback from the past Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) actions. The survey was sent to nearly 900 people from the public utilizing both online and mail-based surveys. Dr. Simmons explained that the survey assessed perceptions of past CCMP actions, the estuary program's credibility, habitat preferences, water quality perceptions and residents' experiences with nature. He highlighted that all CCMP actions were viewed as important, with emerging contaminants and health indicators ranking highest among public respondents.

Dr. Simmons also reviewed differences between public and partner organization responses. He stated that the greatest perceived achievements were in community-based actions, such as recreational access, public involvement, living shorelines and fertilizer ordinances – while the lowest reported achievements were associated with emerging contaminants, dredging impacts, health indicators and tidal tributaries. He noted that regional relevance was the strongest predictor of perceived importance and discussed geographic variations in local relevance across counties. He discussed how feasibility ratings varied, with partners viewing community actions and living shorelines as most feasible over the next decade, while emerging contaminants and dredging impacts were seen as least feasible.

Dr. Simmons discussed how both the public and in-network respondents currently use CCMP. He stated that most people rely on the plan as an informational resource to learn about issues affecting Tampa Bay, understand the actions being taken to address those issues, and identify ways they can personally help improve the bay. However, the CCMP is not widely used as a practical tool; very few respondents use it to solve community problems, develop research projects, or prepare grant applications. These findings raise broader questions for the upcoming CCMP update, including whether the plan should continue serving primarily as an informational document or evolve into a more practical guide for conservation and management.

Dr. Simmons concluded by announcing an upcoming Habitat Restoration Consortium meeting on August 26 and added that there is a recording of a past Management Board meeting available on the Tampa Bay Estuary Program's YouTube page. A full report of the Baywide Satisfaction Survey will be released in the coming weeks.

Ms. Jennifer Hecker asked for clarification on negative perceptions of living shorelines. Dr. Simmons explained that survey participants tended to rate seawalls as more desirable, aesthetically pleasing, safe and even more natural than living shoreline alternatives. He also noted upcoming research funded by Florida Sea Grant to further study social perceptions of shoreline designs.

6. 2026 Freeze Event

April Breton, Water Use Permit Bureau Chief, presented on the 2026 freeze event. She began by reviewing the 2010 freeze event, during which temperatures dropped below 34 degrees for 11 consecutive days, resulting in over 750 well complaints, approximately 140 sinkholes and over \$8 million in damages. Following that event, the District evaluated its strategies and coordinated with agricultural and community stakeholders to establish the Dover/Plant City Water Use Caution Area (DPCWUCA), which covers 259 square miles.

The DPCWUCA established restrictions on new Upper Floridan Aquifer withdrawals used for crop protection, updated well-construction standards and required pump depths of at least 100 feet north of I-4 and 142 feet below land surface south of I-4. The District also developed a tool to better assign well pumping responsibility to water use permittees, ensuring residents adversely impacted during cold protection events receive appropriate mitigation. In addition, the District enhanced its "real-time" groundwater monitoring capabilities by installing automatic meter-reading devices on all cold protection withdrawal points.

Ms. Breton then reviewed the complaint allocation process. She explained that the District developed a volume-based methodology to equitably assign responsibility among permittees, based on their cumulative impacts within the area. Each permit is allocated a proportional share of responsibility tied to the total amount of groundwater authorized, with those shares generated through the District's allocation model.

She then provided an overview of the 2026 freeze event, noting that the District was currently in a modified Phase II water shortage. Due to ongoing dry conditions, aquifer levels were approximately 12 feet lower going into the 2026 freeze event compared to January 2010. The District experienced five nights of below-freezing temperatures within a week, along with one night of pumping in mid-January. Aquifer levels dropped to 2.5 feet and may have been lower due to a data recording error. The District received approximately 288 dry well complaints. All water use permitting staff assisted with calls. The majority of the complaints were resolved promptly, with remaining delays due to limited availability of well drillers.

Moving forward, the District will focus on improving the speed of the Well Mitigation Allocation Assessment) tool as well as the reliability of the automatic meter readers. Ms. Breton noted that issues sometimes arise when responsibility for complaint investigation and mitigation associated with leased properties is not established in advance. In these cases, the District defaults to holding the permittee responsible. She also explained that wells not meeting the stipulations of their Well Construction Permit are ineligible for investigation and mitigation. Additionally, the current \$1,500 reimbursement for pre-complaint repairs has not been updated since the rules were adopted in 2011.

Ms. Breton concluded by reviewing permit conditions related to mitigation during crop establishment. She stated that the District sends annual reminder letters to permittees outlining their mitigation responsibilities. Prior to freeze events, the District also issues press releases alerting residents to potential freezing temperatures and advising permittees to turn off pumps to help reduce dry-well complaints.

7. Lake Wailes Minimum Lake Level Reevaluation

Jason Patterson, Lead Scientific Modeler, presented the reevaluation of minimum levels for Lake Wailes, explaining the purpose of minimum flows and levels and the regulatory, ecological, and recreational considerations involved. He stated that a minimum level is the level of groundwater in an aquifer and the level of surface water at which further withdrawals would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area. He described the process for establishing these levels, including data collection, model development, public input and eventual Board adoption. Lake Wailes is a 300-acre lake located along the Lake Wales Ridge and lies within the Southern Water Use Caution Area and the Central Florida Water Initiative region.

Mr. Patterson detailed the development of long-term historic percentiles using a water budget model incorporating lake stage, rainfall, aquifer data, evaporation, land use and soils. After removing pumping effects and extending the data set to a 60-year rainfall cycle, the long-term historic P50 value was determined to be 104.3 feet. Environmental standards were then applied, including the species richness standard and the wetland offset standard. Because Lake Wailes is characteristic of xeric conditions, the xeric offset was used, resulting in a proposed minimum lake level of 102.1 feet, with a high minimum lake level of 106.3 feet. This represented a change from previously established levels of 104.8 and 107.7 feet.

Screening tools were applied to ensure the proposed levels protected environmental values. The aquatic habitat zone screening showed no exceedance of the 15% reduction threshold, basin connectivity was not applicable, aesthetic screening confirmed the proposed level exceeded the historic P80 threshold, and dock-use screening found no impact to floating docks.

Mr. Patterson noted that no additional considerations were needed for that particular lake, and that the xeric offset standard remained appropriate throughout all evaluations.

In closing, Mr. Patterson stated that Lake Wailes is expected to meet the proposed levels over the next 20-year planning horizon and that no recovery or prevention strategy is required. He recommended moving forward with adoption.

Chair Sherwood asked whether future rainfall change factors from the Florida Flood Hub were considered. Mr. Patterson explained that while the minimum level methodology relies on historic data rather than predictive modeling, the District does evaluate future rainfall scenarios for planning purposes and is actively examining recent shifts in rainfall patterns.

8. Upper Peace River Minimum Flows Reevaluation

Dr. Lei Yang, Chief Professional Engineer, presented the recommended minimum flows for the upper Peace River. She explained that Minimum Flows and Levels (MFLs) are the limits at which further withdrawal would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of an area. The District adopted a 15% change in habitat availability as the standard for determining significant harm, an approach supported by more than 20 independent peer review panels. MFLs are not permits; instead, they guide water use permitting, water supply planning, and ongoing monitoring. She noted the upper Peace River is a complex system characterized by multiple segments, long-term flow declines, and significant karst features that contribute to streamflow losses.

The District adopted minimum low flows for the upper Peace River in 2006 and implemented a Southern Water Use Caution Area recovery strategy. A major component of that strategy was modifying the Lake Hancock P11 control structure to store wet season water and release it during dry periods. Since operation of the modified structure, the river has met its minimum low flow targets every year from 2015 to 2025, except during the 2017 drought. With improved data, enhanced modeling tools and better hydrologic understanding, the District has now reevaluated minimum flows for the full flow regime.

The recommended minimum flows were developed using a habitat-based approach designed to protect both instream and floodplain habitats and their ecological functions. Baseline flows were developed using the Peace River Integrated Model (PRIM 2), and the flow regime was divided into low, medium, and high flow blocks. Minimum flows for each block were established using criteria derived from analyses of the lowest wetted perimeter inflection point, fish passage, instream habitat, woody habitat, and floodplain inundation. A percent-of-flow reduction approach was applied, along with the 15% habitat loss criterion, to determine minimum flows and allowable reductions for medium and high flow conditions. The resulting minimum flows vary by river segment and flow block, with no withdrawals allowed in the low flow block to preserve essential aquatic habitat.

Dr. Yang reported that recent assessments indicate that the recommended minimum flows are currently being met and are projected to remain in compliance for the next 20 years. Compliance is supported by the monitoring network, water use permitting, and regional water supply planning, and reviewed annually, every five years and as needed. She noted that an independent scientific peer review panel completed its review in June 2026 and found that the District's work to be technically sound, well documented, and based on applicable and pertinent data, appropriate modeling, analyses, and assumptions, with reasonable conclusions. All panel recommendations were addressed, and stakeholder engagement has occurred through public workshops, presentations to advisory committees, peer review meetings, and ongoing opportunities. The final minimum flow report is expected to be presented to the Governing Board in August, with rulemaking continuing into fall 2026.

Ms. Mary Willa Matz reported that, based on Sid Flannery's expertise, the Sierra Club is requesting additional time to evaluate whether existing flows in the upper Peace River meet the proposed minimum flows. She asked the EAC to review Appendix K, noting that it contains technical information suggesting the minimum flows are not being met, and referenced the Sierra Club's submitted slides. She requested that the minimum flow recommendation not advance to the Governing Board until the EAC has more time for review and discussion.

Dr. Yang responded to Mr. Flannery's submission by thanking him for his careful review but disagreed with his conclusion and with the method he used to assess minimum flow compliance at the Fort Meade gauge. She explained that baseline flows derived from the regional groundwater model are not intended for direct day-to-day comparison with measured gauge flows, and therefore his approach does not provide a valid assessment of whether minimum flows are being met.

A request was made to postpone this recommendation until the October EAC meeting so that Mr. Flannery could have time to prepare a presentation. Mr. Randy Smith noted that MFL compliance was a subject of discussion during the peer review meeting and the peer reviewers supported the District's work.

Mr. Tom Palmer asked how confident the District was that the upper Peace River would continue to meet minimum flows over the next 20 years, due to the uncertainty of future climate conditions. He also inquired how the District's minimum flow recommendations related to the Polk Regional Water Cooperative's (PRWC) interest in withdrawing water from the Peace River south of Fort Meade for storage in a former clay settling area. He added that, based on conversations with Mr. Flannery, he believes the process may need to slow down given ongoing concerns about the river's condition. Mr. Smith responded that any future withdrawals proposed by the PRWC would be evaluated through the water use permitting process, and any adopted minimum flows in place at that time would be fully incorporated into that review. He emphasized that this requirement applies not only to PRWC but to all applicants seeking water use permits on the upper Peace River.

Discussion ensued during which multiple questions were asked by committee members and addressed by District staff.

9. Development of Agenda Topics

Ms. Matz requested to bring back the upper Peace River minimum flows for further review, which would allow Mr. Flannery to present his technical perspective. Mr. Dwayne Carlton requested discussion on the potential constitutional amendment that may reduce revenues for government agencies and its possible implications for the water management districts.

10. Announcements and Other Business

None.

11. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:16 p.m.