



**ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
TUESDAY, JULY 8, 2025 – 10:00 AM
2379 BROAD STREET, BROOKSVILLE, FLORIDA 34604**

MINUTES

Committee Members Present

Jennifer Hecker – Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership
Becky Aych – Environmental Confederation of Southwest Florida
Jennifer Brunty – Manatee County Chamber of Commerce
Kathleen Castor – Manatee County Chamber of Commerce - alternate
Dwayne Carlton – The Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership
Dave Tomasko – 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

Emily Keenan – Environmental Science Associates
Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon - FDACS

Staff Members

Adrienne Vining
April Breton
Bob Thompson
Candice Harris
Chris Tumminia
Chris Anastasiou
Chris Zajac
Frank Gargano
Jay Hoecker
Jennette Seachrist
Jenni Williams
Jeremy McKay
Jerry Harding
Joe Quinn
Kristina Deak
Madison Trowbridge
Michelle Hopkins
Morgan Mathews
Randy Smith
Robyn Felix
Ryan Pearson
Steve DeSmith
Taylor Greenan
Vivianna Bendixon

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, July 8, 2025, via Microsoft Teams.

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

2. Additions and Deletions to the Agenda

None.

3. Approval of the April 8, 2025, Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the draft minutes from the April 8, 2025, meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Public Comments

None.

5. Elections of Chair and Vice Chair

Mr. Ed Sherwood was nominated for Chair and Mr. Dwayne Carlton was nominated for Vice Chair. A motion was made and passed by the committee.

6. Hydrologic Conditions Update

Mr. Steve DeSmith, Senior Professional Geologist, provided a hydrologic conditions update. The District is currently in its rainy season which runs from June through September. The dry season has ended, which ran from October of last year through May of this year, and was drier than average. The District normally averages 3.6 inches of rainfall in May, but this year received 5.2 inches, which was a 1.6-inch surplus. For May, the highest amount of rainfall was 17.2 inches in Polk County, and the low was 1.4 inches in Charlotte County.

Mr. DeSmith showed a figure for the 12-month rainfall distribution from June 2024 through May 2025. The District normally averages about 52.7 inches of rainfall for the 12-month period, but data indicate the rainfall totals were 57 inches, which was a 4.3-inch surplus. A graph of the 12-month cumulative rainfall was presented, showing multiple 12-month periods of surplus or deficit rainfall since 1998. The 12-month period ending May 2025 showed a 4.3-inch surplus. Last May, the District had a 7.4-inch deficit, so conditions did improve over the last 12 months.

Looking at the dry season and the rainfall distribution from October 2024 through May 2025, the District normally averages 21.7 inches of rainfall, but this year received 21.1 inches which was 0.6-inch deficit. The highest amount of rainfall was 34.5 inches in Polk County and the lowest amount was 11.3 inches in Hardee County.

The provisional rainfall distribution from June 1 – 22 indicates that the District received less than average rainfall. The typical average is 7.7 inches, but this year only reached 5.7 inches, which was a 2.0-inch rainfall deficit.

Ms. Becky Ayech asked where the rain gauge was located that is utilized in the Manatee County area bordering Sarasota County. Mr. DeSmith responded that they have 140 rain gauges distributed throughout the District. They also receive radar-adjusted rainfall amounts at over 100,000 pixels areas where radar rainfall is provided by a contractor once a month. He encouraged her to go to the District's website and visit the Hydrologic Data page where there is a rainfall map published daily and shows the locations of the 140 rain gauges by region. Mr. DeSmith said he would contact Ms. Ayech after the meeting to provide her with additional information regarding her inquiry.

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 levels for the City of Tampa's Hillsborough River Reservoir, public supply volumes for the C.W. Bill Young Regional Reservoir, and the water quantities stored in the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority's reservoir and aquifer storage and recovery wellfield.

Ms. Ayech asked if the groundwater levels used to make the graphs were an accumulation of monitor wells with the average taken or if it was a specific monitor well that was used consistently. Mr. DeSmith responded that there are 80 wells Districtwide with 20 wells in the northern region, 30 wells in the central region and approximately 20 wells in the southern region. An average of those wells is used for the month within each region.

Discussion ensued.

Chair Tomasko asked about the slide of Northern Lakes and stated that it looked like a step change. He asked if there was a management action that helped and if this happened due to groundwater withdrawals. Mr. DeSmith responded that they were regional lake levels and the reason they declined at the recent peak level, then go below the normal level, is because of the heavy rainfall that occurred last rainy season. We received abundant rainfall from multiple tropical storms including hurricanes Milton, Helene and Debby. That rainfall brought the Northern Lakes levels up to the above-normal level.

Mr. DeSmith then discussed the Near-Term Climate Forecast and showed seasonal outlooks for temperature and precipitation for July 2025 to September 2025. The Climate Prediction Center is predicting above normal rainfall and temperatures for the three-month period. For the extended climate forecast, they are also predicting above normal rainfall Districtwide through October of this year. The National Hurricane Center is predicting for the 2025 Atlantic hurricane season, above average hurricane activity with 13-19 named storms, 6-10 hurricanes, and of those, 3-5 major hurricanes.

Looking at July, typically tropical storms and hurricanes are generated in the Atlantic Ocean near the east coast of the U.S., in the southern Caribbean or the Gulf.

Mr. DeSmith concluded by discussing the tropical weather outlook and stated that there is no tropical cyclone activity in the Gulf, and none is expected in the next seven days.

Mr. Sid Flannery asked Mr. DeSmith to confirm the slide that showed 57 inches of rainfall. Mr. DeSmith responded that it was the total rainfall for the 12-month period last year. On average for the year, the District receives about 52.7 inches, but by May of this year received 57 inches which ran a 4.3-inch surplus for the year.

7. Springs Coast Seagrass Results

Dr. Chris Anastasiou, Ph.D., Chief Water Quality Scientist, provided an update of the 2024 Springs Coast seagrass mapping results. Dr. Anastasiou spoke of the many benefits of healthy seagrass including that it is a natural barrier against erosion, stabilizing sediment, and reducing turbidity in the water column. Seagrass also helps remove excess nutrients from the water, sequesters and stores carbon, provides habitat for fish and shellfish, and is an important food source for manatees and sea turtles. Seagrasses are also sensitive to water quality degradation and are a primary indicator of overall estuarine health.

The seagrass mapping program began in 1988 and has been noted as one of the longest-running and most comprehensive aerial seagrass mapping programs in the world. There are two regions: the Suncoast and the Springs Coast. The Suncoast goes from Clearwater Harbor south to Charlotte Harbor and covers about 1,263 square miles and is mapped on a two-year cycle. The Springs Coast began in 2007 and goes from Anclote Key north to Waccasassa Bay east of Cedar Key and covers 1,280 square miles and is mapped on a four-year cycle. The methodology has evolved over time and is similar to what other water management districts do. There is coordination with the St. John's River Water Management District, who is responsible for mapping the Indian River Lagoon on the east coast and the South Florida Water Management District which maps the lower Charlotte Harbor area around Estero Bay.

Dr. Anastasiou provided an overview of the mapping process, discussing the three elements: aerial image acquisition, photointerpretation and field verification. Results are based on aerial photography using fixed-wing manned aircraft designed for collecting digital imagery. The digital images are processed and signed off by the District's survey supervisor and are given to photo interpreters who then create the maps.

Dr. Anastasiou discussed the different seagrass mapping conventions which are continuous, patchy and attached algae. He then presented the 2024 results as compared to the previous 2022 results. Dr. Anastasiou gave a quick recap of the Suncoast results which include St. Joseph Sound/Clearwater Harbor, Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, Lemon Bay and Charlotte Harbor. The results were mostly positive with either no change or modest gains in all the Suncoast estuaries, except

Charlotte Harbor, which saw a 6% loss in seagrass. The Charlotte Harbor estuary is at record low seagrass coverage following back-to-back losses beginning in 2018. Old Tampa Bay reported an 8% loss over the 2022-2024 period and was the only segment in Tampa Bay to report a negative change. In 2024, they mapped about 78,000 acres of grass across the entire Suncoast region.

Dr. Anastasiou then discussed the results of the Springs Coast which include the Waccasassa Bay, Withlacoochee, Crystal Bay, Homosassa, Chassahowitzka, Weeki Wachee, Aripeka, Pithlachascotee and Anclote. He presented tables showing the percentage change from 2020 to 2024 for both inshore and offshore segments. In 2024, the map showed 581,000 acres of seagrass, which is the largest in the state of Florida and one of the largest in the country. When comparing the 2024 results with 2020 there was a very slight reduction of 5,654 acres which is a 1% change.

Dr. Anastasiou concluded by showing maps from 2007 to 2024 and discussed the time series and how they extended the maps and expanded over the five time periods. The number of Springs Coast seagrasses are consistent from 2016 to 2024 and there are no major changes across the region. Overall, the dominant signature remains seagrass. The habitat mosaics of sponges, corals, attached algae and hard bottom habitat are all very common in the offshore regions. The region has continued to be relatively stable and resilient seagrass ecosystem over time.

Chair Tomasko asked if there were any water quality trends that concern the District regarding whether the fairly stable resource might have stressors that they need to stay on top of. Dr. Anastasiou responded that the water quality data is in a project called Project Coast, which is a long-term data set that the District took over in 2012 and is now with the University of Florida. It includes about 100 stations across the Springs Coast region. No major shifts in water quality were seen in the adjacent coastal waters offshore, but that does not mean it is not an issue. There may not be any major trends in the water column, but it does not necessarily mean there is not an impact.

Mr. Flannery asked if the sampling went into the rivers which extend off the mouths of the rivers of the Springs Coast region. Dr. Anastasiou responded that they do have a sister project managed by Dr. Madison Trowbridge for the spring-fed rivers. Consideration was given to doing aerial imagery into the rivers, but the problem is poor visibility due to the trees covering the entire area. Instead, a different method for mapping is used in spring-fed rivers based on transects instead of aerial imagery.

8. Public Draft 2025 Regional Water Supply Plan

Mr. Ryan Pearson, Water Supply Manager, provided an overview of the public draft 2025 Regional Water Supply Plan (RWSP). Regional water supply planning is required by section 373.709, Florida Statutes, and is also included within the District's Strategic Plan. A RWSP assesses projected water demands and potential sources of water to meet those demands and is required where water sources are not adequate to supply existing and future uses, as well as sustain water resources and related natural systems. The District currently publishes a RWSP for all four planning regions.

The RWSP is updated and published every five years and covers a 20-year planning period. The 2025 RWSP covers the time period from 2025 through 2045, while the prior 2020 RWSP covered 2020 through 2040. There are five key components included in the RWSP which include resource protection criteria, demand estimates and projections, evaluation of water sources, water supply and resource development projects, and overview of funding mechanisms.

The process for developing the RWSP began in 2023 with the development of demand projections. Throughout late 2023 to early 2024, the draft demand figures were shared with each of the advisory committees for feedback. In addition, project options were solicited for meeting demands from local governments and utilities for potential inclusion in the RWSP. The draft plan was presented to the District's Governing Board at its May meeting, and the public review and comment period kicked off last week, with the draft 2025 RWSP currently available on the District's website. Comments and feedback received will be reviewed and considered for potential incorporation into the draft RWSP.

The RWSP includes resource protection criteria, which details the primary strategies employed by the District to protect water resources. These include minimum flows and levels, water use caution areas (WUCAs), prevention and recovery strategies, and reservations. Currently, a large portion of the District is covered by several WUCAs including Northern Tampa Bay, Dover/Plant City, and Southern. A portion of the District is also within the Central Florida Water Initiative Planning Area, which is a joint planning effort between the District, St. John's River Water Management District, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

After detailing resource protection criteria, projected demands are then calculated over the planning horizon. Demands are projected for five water use sectors including public supply, agriculture, industrial/commercial and mining/dewatering, power generation and landscape/recreation. These projections use the best available data from a variety of different sources.

Mr. Pearson discussed the demand projections over the planning period by water use category and by planning region. He then explained that a variety of sources were evaluated to meet those demands over the next 20 years. These sources include fresh groundwater, brackish groundwater, reclaimed water, water conservation, surface water, stormwater and seawater. Also evaluated was storage capacity, such as aquifer storage and recovery and reservoirs. He then discussed water supply and resource development projects, including both potential project options and District-funded projects that are already under development.

He then gave an overview of the funding mechanisms which are key to developing these project options, again mentioning several projects are already under development with District cooperative funding. Several of these projects are also receiving state funding through the water supply and water resource development grant program.

Mr. Pearson concluded by discussing the 2025 RWSP findings. Using a combination of alternative water sources, water conservation measures and fresh groundwater, the 2025 RWSP finds that water supply demands for all use sectors can be met through 2045, while protecting and restoring natural systems. Within the Northern Planning Region, demands may continue to be met with traditional groundwater sources on a regional scale; however, alternative sources may be needed to supplement traditional sources and meet demands in specific high-growth areas. Regionally, the need for groundwater supplies can be reduced through the use of available reclaimed water and implementation of comprehensive conservation measures.

Mr. Flannery asked if it is assumed for spring-fed rivers like Crystal River and Weeki Wachee that water availability is determined more by groundwater modeling and the MFLs for those rivers versus surface water withdrawals. Mr. Pearson responded that they did not have any project options identified for surface water withdrawals in those areas. Mr. Flannery also asked what procedure was being taken regarding surface water bodies and adopted MFLs. Mr. Pearson responded if those projects came under further development they would work with our regulatory staff to determine the specific number of permitted supplies with which MFLs do come under consideration.

Ms. Ayeche asked how they make the determination for unpermitted but available surface waterbodies that have been identified to get permitted. Mr. Pearson responded the RWSP is a planning exercise and the regulatory component of it is separate from this. Any water use permits would have to come through the District's Regulation Division to officially make that determination. Ms. April Breton added that as long as the application received meets the rule criteria and there is availability, then there is a possibility that a permit would be issued. Ms. Ayeche also asked how the Toilet-to-Tap Water program in Polk County was going and if it was successful. Mr. Pearson responded that there have been a few direct potable reuse pilot projects in Polk County, and they have been identified in the plan under project options. Mr. Jay Hoecker added that direct potable reuse was an option that they feel is going to be viable in the future. A number of feasibility studies have been funded including Polk County and Plant

City. There is language regarding direct potable reuse and project options in the RWSP and is also supported in the District's Strategic Plan as both a regional priority and a strategic initiative.

Mr. Dwayne Carlton asked where the surface water plant was planned on the upper Withlacoochee. Mr. Pearson responded that he did not know the specific location, but that he would look into it and provide him with more details at a later time.

Discussion ensued.

9. Development of Agenda Topics

Mr. Sherwood requested an update on the status and trends of macrophyte seagrass information and spring-fed river systems. Mr. Flannery requested a presentation on how the District expects to handle multiple water use on rivers. Mr. Gordon Colvin requested the topic of seagrass and benthic algae in spring-fed rivers due to the loss of manatees. Ms. Ayech requested the topic of Myakka River results of fish kills and how they have been determined.

10. Announcements and Other Business

Ms. Virginia Singer stated that District staff are planning to provide an update on Flatford Swamp at the October meeting. Chair Tomasko asked when the new Chair and Vice Chair roles would be effective. Ms. Singer responded that it would become effective at the next meeting in October and added that she would send the next fiscal year meeting dates once they have been established.

11. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:59 a.m.