

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Estuary Passes Another Sad Threshold

The Caloosahatchee River passed yet another sad milestone this past weekend with 2016 becoming the second worst year for the estuary since record keeping began in 1963. So far this year the Caloosahatchee Estuary has experienced 226 days of flow above the harm threshold of 2800 cubic feet per second, as measured by the Corps of Engineers at Franklin Lock and Dam east of Fort Myers. The high flows have persisted for 80% of the entire year. Only 2005, the year of Hurricane Wilma, had more harmful flow days, 230, only four days more than this year. If another large rain comes before year's end, even the 2005 record could fall.

Caloosahatchee Riverwatch director John Cassani explained, "These high flow problems typically happen between July and November, but this year they began in January due to the powerful El Nino, and they continued unrelentingly throughout the year."

Another Riverwatch director, Dr. John Capece, an agricultural engineer in LaBelle, has been tracking the Caloosahatchee flows since January using data published by the Corps of Engineers, South Florida Water Management District, and U.S. Geological Survey.

Capece said, "Agency flow estimates show that Lake Okeechobee discharges are responsible for roughly 55% of all water coming down the Caloosahatchee River. But when placed on top of the local watershed runoff between Moore Haven and Ft Myers, Lake O accounts for 75% of the harmful flow into the estuary."

While the number of harmful flow days has been record-breaking, the total volume of harmful flows for the year has not. The 2016 total of 1.27 million acre-feet typically happens once every ten years.

The Corps of Engineers, the federal agency that controls Lake O releases, has struggled against factors including a strong El Nino with its heavy winter rains, a weak dike surrounding parts of Lake Okeechobee, and grossly insufficient basin storage,

"The Corps and SFWMD could have done what they've done in past years – drain the Kissimmee River Basin and immediately dump that water from Lake O to the east and west coast estuaries. But instead they have repeatedly rolled the dice and stored more waters in these areas, risking a direct hit from a potentially wetter Hurricane Matthew. It's been a year of gutsy calls for the Corps, but so far they've walked the edge as well as they could have given limitations of the current system" said Capece.

The 2016 record flows have caused the water's salt content near Shell Point to become too low. Sea grasses in the lower estuary cannot survive under these conditions. Estuary sea grasses are essential to the survival of many fish and shellfish. Most of Florida's commercial and recreational fisheries are dependent on stable, healthy estuaries. But when salinity falls too low it also affects the reproduction of snook, oysters and tarpon. Making matters worse, the young of the endangered smalltooth sawfish are forced from protective habitats when salinity decreases, making them vulnerable to becoming meals for other fish.

Cassani concludes, "If we don't get some massive storage and treatment system built soon, both north and south of Lake O, these episodes will continue and the estuaries as well as our Gulf Coast surrounding Ft Myers will never fully recover. Riverwatch began in 1994 where there was already a serious problem, but it's gotten worse since then. During these two decades we have stumbled from tragic year to tragic year starting in 1995, then 1998, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2013 and now 2016. In these seven years the estuary received harmful flows for an average of 190 days each, more than half of all days of the year. Our waters are taking repeated body blows at a rate faster than they can recover from them. Continued inaction is a formula for a tragic outcome of historic proportions."

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Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association (Riverwatch) is a non-profit organization affiliated with Waterkeeper Alliance. Riverwatch strives to improve the River from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico.