

# Here's what the Army Corps LOSOM decision means for the future of the St. Lucie River

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After years of research and months of deliberation, the verdict is in: The overall amount of Lake Okeechobee freshwater discharges flowing east toward the St. Lucie River could likely be reduced by up to 40%.

That's according to the latest Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual model that will guide the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in managing the 730-square-mile lake's levels over the next decade, the agency announced Tuesday. LOSOM will replace the previous plan, written in 2008, nicknamed LORS.

"This is a major step forward," said Ben Hogarth, a City of Stuart spokesperson who is involved in the Corps' process. "It's the largest step forward for the emancipation of the St. Lucie River in decades."

The outcome, though, isn't what Hogarth and Treasure Coast clean-water advocates have sought for decades: Zero overall discharges flooding into to the estuary. But, considering the gives-and-takes of managing Florida's largest freshwater lake, it's a step in the right direction, he told TCPalm.

Though this is considered the "final" LOSOM framework, the Army Corps will continue to mold the data into a workable schedule before implementing it in 2023, when a roughly \$1.8 billion project to strengthen the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding the lake is complete, said Project Manager Tim Gysan.

According to the latest timeline, the agency will:

- Present a "preferred alternative" in mid-December
- Release a final environmental impact statement in October 2022
- Approve the final version about two months after that

Here's what else LOSOM could mean for the future of the St. Lucie River and the greater Everglades ecosystem, according to Col. James Booth, the Corps' Florida commander:

-- The new plan will eliminate Lake O discharges to the St. Lucie River "under normal conditions." That means there will be no lake water heading east roughly 95% of the time. Under the current plan, there were zero releases only 37% of the time.

-- There will be less discharges heading toward the St. Lucie River during months when algae blooms are most prominent on Lake O.

-- Lake O flows south to the thirsty Everglades will increase to an annual average of 65 billion gallons — enough to douse about 200,000 acres in a foot of water.

The overall amount of days where the St. Lucie River experiences a "discharge event" could be reduced by up to 87%, Hogarth said. But the door is still open for high volume releases when they do head east.

A proposed "recovery mode" could reduce some of the benefits. LOSOM "is without doubt the most important water management effort we are working on in Central and South Florida for the next year," Booth said Tuesday. "All of those goals boil down to one basic idea:

We must improve on the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule (LORS) we have operated under since 2008."

LOSOM determines when, where and how much polluted freshwater released from the lake is sent east to the brackish river estuary in Stuart, where it can kill oysters and seagrasses and cause toxic algae blooms that can kill pets and harm people.

Florida east coast residents want no Lake O water fouling waterways and causing toxic algae blooms.

West coast residents want lake water only during the dry winter months, to keep saltwater intrusion at bay.

Okeechobee and West Palm Beach want it for drinking.

Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) farmers want it for irrigation.

Glades residents don't want it to breach the Herbert Hoover Dike and flood their communities.

The Corps ran about 240,000 models and narrowed them to eight on Oct. 26. Each one increased the amount of Lake O water flowing through the Port Mayaca and St. Lucie dams to the river each year, compared to what the agency first proposed in July.

That change concerned Treasure Coast lawmakers and clean-water advocates.

The Stuart-based nonprofit Friends of the Everglades called it an "11th hour" decision. U.S. Rep Brian Mast, R-Palm City, expressed "very real frustration and anger." Indian Riverkeeper Mike Conner was "less optimistic" about the new changes.

One day after getting that feedback — including concerns the plan could harm the lake's ecology too — the agency delayed announcing the latest LOSOM plan by two weeks, Lt. Col. Todd Polk told news reporters Oct. 29. The agency needed more time to evaluate that input on their mountains of data, he said.

In the wake of the Corps' latest announcement Tuesday, Rep. Mast released a statement claiming the feds favored the interests of sugarcane growers over the well-being of the state's coastal estuaries. "The truth is that, in the final months of this process, the Army Corps chose to prioritize increased water supply for sugarcane over the health of the estuaries and Lake Okeechobee," Mast said. He made similar claims in May, when he said sugar lobbyists were helping in the Corps' LOSOM process.

The Corps has denied that, saying local government stakeholders only hired consultants to represent their interests.

There was some good news with the latest decision, Mast noted. "Under the proposed plan, more water can flow south into the Everglades while less water will likely flow east and west during the summer months when the risk

of algal blooms is highest," he said. "This is an improvement on the very bad status quo."