

# Rivers Coalition

## Meeting Minutes: February 24, 2022

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**Members via Zoom:** Mark Perry -Zack(FOS), Charles Grande (Pres. Council of H.I.), Jim Moir (MRC), Todd Thurlow (North River Shores HOA), Blair Wickstrom (Florida Sportsman), Nic Mader (River Kidz), Eve Samples-Gil Smart-Allie Hartmann (Friends of Everglades), Walter Deemer (League of Women's Voter of MC), Carol Ann Leonard (Martin County Democratic Environmental Caucus), Diane Goldberg (St. Lucie Audubon), Jim Wharton (Harbour Ridge Yacht Club ), Dan Merritt (Seagate HOA), Greg Braun (Guardians of MC), Joann Swann (St. Lucie Sailing Club), Paul Gray (Audubon), Shari Anker (Conservation Alliance of St Lucie County)

**Non-members via Zoom:** Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch-(SFWMD), Tim Gysan-Erica Skolte (USACE), Merritt Matheson (Stuart City Council), Deb Drum (PB County), Dianne Hughes (Martin County), Adnan Alghita, Don Kurtz, Vincent Econmio, Caitlin Neukamp, Laura Vennard, Pat LaBalbo, Robert Mathias, Anne Cox, Kelly Cox, Barbara Osborn, Douglas Ashley, Regina Wood, Lisa Alley, Tom MacVicar, Stephen Chalmers, Charles Murphy, Karen Templer, Wayne, Joan B.

Mark Perry called the meeting to order at 11:00 am. 46 people on ZOOM call  
Minutes taken by Miki Blumenthal, Administrative Assistant

**Opening Comments:** Mark Perry paid tribute to Maggy Hurchalla, renowned environmental activist who passed away last weekend.

### **Conservation Alliance of Saint Lucie County - Shari Anker**

Conservation alliances are working with Professor Reed and Dr. Gilmore to help save the Oculina Coral Reef (from Fort Pierce to St. Augustine). It is the only one of its kind on the planet, and only 10% of it remains. NOAA is considering opening it up to the shrimp trawling industry. The Conservation Alliance has put a petition on change.org and is sending two letters. Asking people to sign the petition and also for NGOs to sign the letter. Sign petition here: <https://bit.ly/3l3tirv>. Email her at [sranker@mac.com](mailto:sranker@mac.com) for copy of draft letter. Mark Perry mentioned it is an important reef system and is a spawning ground. Shrimp trawlers destroyed much of it in the past.

### **Presentation:**

**2022 Legislative Update by Gil Smart:** Gil gave a status update on current Florida legislative session and the status of some of the water bills. Importantly, the seagrass mitigation banking bill stalled and is going nowhere this year.

With regard to SB2508, (<https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/2508>), this bill was sprung on us by surprise on Friday, February 4th. There was only one chance for public comments before it was going to hearing the following Wednesday. The original bill was basically an attempt to "run around" the LOSOM process and also dilute EAA funding, with policies benefiting the sugar industry. Opposition sprang into action, with more than 40,000 emails sent and over 1200 phone calls. The bill passed the appropriations committee, and went on to pass the Senate but with some major amendments. Much of what was most objectionable was removed from the bill, but water shortage rules were kept which would protect Big Sugar. The bill passed in the House and it now goes to Senate, House, and Governor as one budget package. No more public comment allowed. The only possible opposition now, if any of the provisions remain in the budget bill, would be for the governor to veto the entire budget. DeSantis does not like that the legislation was "rammed through."

Opponents should contact their local legislators to ask them to voice their opposition. It still remains a terrible bill.

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### **Q&A:**

Dr. Paul Gray (in Senator Albritton's district) shared a flyer he received in the mail asking people to vote yes for SB2508. RC will share the flyer with members.

Charles Grande commented that our local legislators (Harrell, Overdorf) have no influence over the budget and that opposition should instead contact the governor.

Mark Perry asked Gil to keep the RC updated on the status.

*ZOOM RC meeting recording can be seen at [www.riverscoalition.org](http://www.riverscoalition.org)*

### **Discussion: (summary of discussion-not verbatim)**

#### **Government & Agency Reports:**

**Martin County:** Dianne Hughes went over Lake Okeechobee inflows and outflows, showing some outflow from S308 and south, and quite a bit going to the Caloosahatchee. Chart for mid-estuary salinity shows good salinity levels since the end of January. Chart for enterococcus levels shows all sites looking good since January, including Jensen Beach and the Stuart Causeway. Water clarity is great; Willoughby Creek STA is completed. Next county projects: Savanna Weir is designed and ready for bid. East Fork Creek is designed.

**City of Stuart/LOSOM-** Mayor Matheson went to the groundbreaking of C23/C24 and says it will significantly improve water quality for the North Fork. The City of Stuart and local captains hosted Col Polk and Col Booth for a tour of the North Fork, showing them the contrast between the North Fork and the C24 canal. Yesterday the USACE hosted higher-ups at the C44 canal. Mayor Matheson thanked the City Commissioners for being flexible and quick to react to the SB2508 legislation that sprung up. They sent a letter to the governor opposing the bill.

**Mark Perry** mentioned the John Marshall Everglades Symposium held this morning at FOS. He thanked all who participated.

**USACE:** Tim Gysan said the next PDT meeting will be on March 7th and will focus on operational guidance. There will be a chance for feedback prior to the draft coming out. There will be a followup listening session open for comments. On track for getting draft EIS out for NEPA review at beginning of May. Lake O watershed restoration project has been stuck in review process for a while and went over benefits of plan. Link to report: <https://www.saj.usace.army.mil/LOWRP/>

**SFWMD:** Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch said the February meeting was completely absorbed with SB2508. The board was against the bill. Since the SFWMD falls under the executive branch of the state government, the board considers SB2508 to be a "full frontal assault" on the governor of Florida. SFWMD is not making further comments on the bill. They feel reassured because of the governor's statement after the original bill was produced. She believes that Governor DeSantis is where he is because of the movement that came out of this area. Jacquie supports Scott's Water Farm that is located in St. Lucie County and will clean 30,000 acres feet of water a year, all part of the C23/C24 basin area. Groundbreaking of C23/C24 STA happened last week and has been on the books since 2007. Next SFWMD meeting will be in Sanibel. Will be looking at C43 reservoir construction. "We have to think about all the great things we're doing as we're being assaulted by the legislature. Gil Smart commented that the SB2508 news had crowded out the recent SFWMD discussion about the buffer zone in the lake and feels we should tell USACE to not rely explicitly on SFWMD.

Jacquie responded that the USACE runs the show and will never just do what SFWMD recommends.

Mark Perry asked Tim Gysan if he had an update on the buffer consideration. Tim said there is no buffer language included in the draft at this time. The intent of the discussion is to ensure water gets where it needs to go and where it will be most beneficial.

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**Lake O Update:** Dr. Paul Gray said the level is now at 14.7 feet which is deep for this time of year. Caloosahatchee getting around 2000 CFS and they do appreciate it. Won't know more about the lake level until April/May.

**Local Update:** Mark Perry shared Governor DeSantis' statement regarding SB2508, and emphasized that we should target the governor to oppose the bill.

Since April 2021, there have been no lake discharges to the estuary. Only basin runoff since then.

Water quality report: We are in good shape, but we have lost a lot of resources (seagrass).

**State and Federal Legislation:** Eve Samples commended Gil's coverage but added that with regard to SB2508, she agrees with Jacquie that we have to stay motivated and find optimism where we can. Celebrate the victories such as the death of the seagrass mitigation bill.

### **Coalition Reports:**

**River Kidz:** Nic Mader thanked everyone for hard work on SB2508. Mentioned that Maggy Hurchalla would be sorely missed by all of the River Kidz. The RK participated in Nature Fest at the Manatee Observation Center this past weekend in full force, asking people to put manatees back on the endangered species list. Mentioned new T-shirts. Tickets available for the Lyric Save the Manatee Event at 7 pm on Thursday, March 24th. Tickets are free and are available at the Lyric and Environmental Studies Center.

**Speakers Bureau:** n/a

**Water Quality Report:** *See Mark Perry's comments under "Local Update" above.*

**Seagrass Update:** [www.eyeonlakeo.com](http://www.eyeonlakeo.com) Todd Thurlow questioned the S308 flows to test the reservoir. How long will the testing phase last, and will the water eventually be sent back to the lake or released to the estuary?

Tim Gysan does not know the status but will find out short-term plan. The testing phase is scheduled for two years.

Jim Moir continues to pick up deceased manatees. Salinity good in estuary; clarity getting better, but too much algae instead of seagrass still. Conditions not good for manatees to recover. Water quality improving but habitat continues to decline.

**Indian Riverkeeper Update:** Mike Conner unable to attend.

**Public Comments:** Mark Perry mentioned there were about 41 participants and that there are attendees who represent agricultural interests, so people are listening to what we are saying.

Charles Grande thanked Jacquie and Eve for reminding us to stay positive and mentioned we have a unique opportunity to reach out to the governor to let him know he has our support if he vetoes the bill.

Mark Perry asked Miki to send around a link to how to contact the governor.

Greg Braun: At the mtg of the Martin Co. Commission on 2/22, the Commission agreed to move forward toward a fall 2022 public referendum to create a funding source for acquisition of conservation lands. If anyone is interested in assisting with this initiative, email me at [dgregbraun@aol.com](mailto:dgregbraun@aol.com) or call at 561-758-3417.

Jim Moir asked Miki to put links from the chat on the website.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:20 pm