

Send to the Executive Director/Head of SJRWMD, FWCC, DEP, DOH, LCWA, Lake County Legislative Delegation

The Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration Council (HCOLRC/Council) was formed by the Florida Legislature in 2001 (Enacting Legislation: CHAPTER 2001-246 Senate Bill No. 1394). Attached is Florida Statute Section 467 Chapter 373 creating the Council and defining its' objectives. The Legislature recognized at that time that the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission FWCC), the Lake County Water Authority (LCWA) along with other state, regional, and local entities, had developed proposals to restore portions of the Harris Chain of Lakes. For over a decade, the Council has reviewed many existing restoration proposals to determine which ones are the most environmentally sound and economically feasible methods of improving the fish and wildlife habitat and natural systems of the Harris Chain of Lakes. Council recommendations are detailed in their Annual Reports to the Legislature.

The Council is now prepared to recommend a Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration (including Lake Apopka) program. Per Florida Statute Chapter 373.468, the Council and FWCC are to recommend a final Harris Chain of Lakes Restoration proposal for the enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat. The Council is seeking input from the agencies regarding their policy positions and what programs they expect to recommend to the Legislature within the next ten years.

Much has changed since 2001, but there is a now a recognition that new approaches, such as dredging and habitat management, need to be adopted to meet the recreational, water quality and habitat objectives for the multi-use Harris Chain of Lakes. Specific questions follow:

Lake Apopka: The Council strongly recommends connecting Lake Apopka to the north shore restoration area (NSRA). The Florida Legislature appointed the SJRWMD as the agency responsible for implementing the farm buy-out program. The plan for restoration after the buy-out focused on re-flooding the farm fields and elimination or breaching of the levees that separated the fields from the main body of the lake, allowing Lake Apopka to return to its historic size." See p. 2 from the report entitled "Final Lake Apopka Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Plan Dated 6/2004." SJRWMD now seems intent on creating a bird sanctuary by placing infrastructure on former farmlands, which may prevent reconnection.

- a) Does your agency support reconnection of the lake and former farmlands? When do you expect the connection to be made if you support the reconnection?
- b) SJRWMD is essentially building a flat sawgrass marsh to try to restore the marsh to its original condition. Alternatively, soil could be mounded to provide wind breaks, small islands of sawgrass, and deep holes, much like a marsh that would be developed by Ducks Unlimited. Deeper channels will allow boats to migrate through the NSRA for bird watching and fishing. Dredging could be used to provide soil for the NSRA.

- c) While SJRWMD has made reductions in phosphorus and chlorophyll (algae) and improved water clarity slightly, fisheries habitat (i.e., aquatic plant) have not increased significantly. What is your agencies' proposal for getting more aquatic plants, e.g., continued plantings, use of geotubes or other types of barriers to facilitate aquatic vegetation establishment by reducing wave action along the shore to form a substrate for rooting, or use the geotubes as barriers to create "islands". Use an approach similar to the Army Corps to create islands similar to Fox Lake in Illinois. (Senator's Hays' Tiger Team supported this approach.)
- d) Water quality improvements have stagnated due to the lack of rainfall and flushing of the lake. Fluid mud is a big problem and when brought to the surface the mud causes viewers to see the lake as a cesspool. How would your agency address the problem? Some have suggested strategic dredging.
- e) The Council does not support gizzard shad harvesting by SJRWMD. Should it continue and at what costs? Should it be implemented down stream?
- f) Aquatic vegetation will improve the establishment of sportfish populations. The Council recommends stocking adult bass when vegetation is limited. FWCC prefers advanced fngerlings, but have had limited success. What approach would you suggest to attract anglers to Lake Apopka?
- g) As vegetation enters the lake, *Hydrilla* will colonize. What will be the approach for managing this plant as it could have benefits for the largemouth bass fishery.
- h) The Council recommends deemphasizing the importance of phosphate levels as science has shown that phosphate is not the major cause of the lake problems. The fffg1981). Aquatic vegetation is the primary problem (too much or too little). How should vegetation be managed and what about the role of MFLs?
- i) Should the NURF be continued or phased out? Should SJRWMD prioritize water for the marsh or downstream users if the marsh is not reconnected.
- j) The Council is not certain organochlorines are responsible for the bird deaths at the NSRA. The Florida Department of Health (DOH) needs to provide threshold action levels for the organochlorines (bans and health advisories). DOH should initiate toxicology studies on ducks and fish collected on the NSRA to determine if they are edible to remove the prohibition from hunting and fishing if the NSRA is reconnected to Lake Apopka.

Downstream Lakes:

- a) Aquatic vegetation is important for fish and other aquatic life. How much vegetation is needed in each lake?
- b) What is the method of management proposed, especially in canals and other off lake sites where homes exits and access is required.

- c) The fisheries have gone up and down. When is stocking advantageous and what are the economic costs for doing nothing?
- d) Dredging is needed in the downstream lakes to remove mud. What are the agency plans, if any?

The Council requests that the following agencies, SJRWMD, FWCC, DEP, DOH, and the Lake County Water Authority formulate their detailed future plans for the Harris Chain of Lakes. The details for the plans must include projected costs. The Council also requests an agency audit of the total amount of tax payer dollars spent by each agency spent, to date, on the projects under taken/completed since the farm buy-out.

The Council requests that these plans be in outline form and sent to HCOLRC c/o Susan Davis at SJRWMD. The Council requests a progress report within 30 days of receiving this request and a final report in 60 days.

Sincerely

Robert R. Johnson
Chairman, HCOLRC
HCOLRC

Skip Goerner
Vice Chairman HCOLRC

Don Nicholson
Secretary