A Resolution from the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council on the Ecological Conditions and Restoration Needs of Everglades National Park and Florida Bay
Motion passed December 8, 2015 (20 in favor, 0 against)

WHEREAS, the waters of the Florida Keys are connected to and dependent on the Everglades landscape as the primary source of fresh water that serves as the foundation of the nearshore estuarine environment; and

WHEREAS, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) helps protect the unique marine waters of the Florida Keys that are a national treasure and of international significance; and

WHEREAS, the statute establishing the FKNMS conveyed to the Sanctuary the responsibility of managing all impacts affecting these resources whether generated from within or from outside the boundaries of the Sanctuary; and

WHEREAS, the ecological health of the FKNMS is inextricably linked to that of Florida Bay and Everglades National Park; and

WHEREAS, Florida Bay is a vitally important seagrass based ecosystem located between the mainland and the Florida Keys, with approximately 20% of Florida Bay within the boundaries of the FKNMS and approximately 80% of Florida Bay within the boundaries of Everglades National Park; and

WHEREAS, the health of Florida Bay is vital to the multi-billion dollar fishing and ecotourism industry of South Florida, including commercial and recreational fishing, snorkeling, diving, boat and equipment rentals, and other related businesses; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS Advisory Council (SAC) recognizes that the restoration of America's Everglades is critical to the long-term sustainability of South Florida's economy, quality of life, and environment; and

WHEREAS, these restoration projects are fully or partially funded by the federal government with goals of restoring national parks and wildlife refuges and protecting endangered species; and

WHEREAS, lack of freshwater flow, coupled with unseasonably low rainfall over the past year, have led to high temperatures and salinity in Florida Bay that have contributed to resultant mass seagrass die-offs that may continue to worsen, and to widespread coral bleaching in the Middle and Lower Keys; and

WHEREAS, scientists caution that a harmful algal bloom in Florida Bay is possible as a result of the widespread sea grass decomposition that could lead to further habitat loss for a number of

species, especially as it spreads through channels and out onto nearby reefs, including sponges, spiny lobster, and a myriad of native fish that would take many years to recover; and

WHEREAS, the dire situation in Florida Bay is a symptom of a larger water crisis plaguing Florida whereby northern coastal estuaries are being inundated by polluted Lake Okeechobee discharges while the Everglades National Park and Florida Bay are starved for freshwater due to lack of infrastructure for treatment and storage of water and restoration of flow; and

WHEREAS, in years past the agencies involved in management of Florida Bay and Everglades restoration projects held a bi-annual Florida Bay Science Conference, which was a productive gathering of scientists and managers that synthesized current conditions, science and management of Florida Bay;

WHEREAS, existing and potential technologies exist that could contribute to seagrass conservation, restoration and recovery;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, through the Superintendent and South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, urges state, federal agency, municipal and tribal partners to expedite full implementation of planned restoration projects, including Modified Water Deliveries to Everglades National Park, C-111 South Dade, C-111 Spreader Canal, the bridging of Tamiami Trail and water storage and treatment south of Lake Okeechobee.

Further, these projects must be operated to maximize restoration goals and ecological benefits to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay. We cannot afford to delay or minimize restoration progress. We request the reinitiation of the bi-annual Florida Bay Science Conference to promote a deeper understanding of the current conditions, science, and management of Florida Bay. Further, we request that the South Florida Water Management District and Army Corps of Engineers attend a meeting of the Sanctuary Advisory Council to discuss issues related to the impacts of the current crisis in Florida Bay and to outline a plan moving forward for the construction and operation of critical restoration projects that will help to prevent similar catastrophes from occurring in the future.

Therefore, National Park Service and other relevant entities should experiment with active interventions that facilitate ecosystem recovery including seagrass restoration, sponge restoration, and bio-geochemical interventions (for example iron treatment for sulfide toxicity) for seagrass recovery.

The council is an advisory body to the sanctuary superintendent. The opinions and findings of this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.