

A Resolution of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council to Create a Working Group entitled: The Florida Keys and South Florida Ecosystem Connectivity Team

Passed unanimously December 8, 2020

WHEREAS, the Florida Keys are part of a complex hydrological system that is influenced by waters from the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, as well as the Greater Everglades ecosystem, which includes Lake Okeechobee and its headwaters, the Everglades Agricultural Area, Water Conservation Areas, Everglades National Park, Florida Bay, Biscayne Bay, Biscayne National Park, and mainland South Florida; and

WHEREAS, the waters of the Florida Keys are connected to and dependent on the Everglades landscape as the primary source of freshwater 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 FKNMS has the authority to coordinate the conservation and management of these marine areas and activities affecting them and to ensure cooperation between Sanctuary managers and other Federal, State, and local authorities with jurisdiction within or adjacent to the Sanctuary; and

WHEREAS, Florida Bay is a vitally important 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 ecological health of the FKNMS is inextricably linked to that of Florida Bay, Everglades National Park, and the greater Everglades ecosystem; and

WHEREAS, Florida Bay and the interconnected habitats of the South Florida coral reef ecosystem are vital to the multi-billion dollar fishing and tourism industry of the Florida Keys and South Florida, including commercial and recreational fishing, snorkeling, diving, boat and equipment rentals, other tourism related businesses, and taxable property values in Monroe County; and

WHEREAS, chronic lack of freshwater flow, coupled with increasingly high temperatures and salinity in Florida Bay, has contributed to mass seagrass die-offs, algal blooms, sponge die-offs, and degraded fishery species habitat; and

WHEREAS, the dire situation in Florida Bay is a sign of a larger water crisis plaguing Florida whereby northern coastal estuaries are being inundated by polluted Lake Okeechobee discharges while 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, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP) was passed by Congress in 2000 as a roadmap to protect, preserve, and restore the Greater Everglades ecosystem; and

WHEREAS, Americans have invested billions of taxpayer dollars into the planning and construction of a number of CERP projects that will ultimately impact the health and sustainability of waters of the

FKNMS, including the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir, Central Everglades Project, Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Project, Biscayne Bay and Southeastern Everglades Ecosystem Restoration Project, bridging of Tamiami Trail, Modified Waters Deliveries Project, C-111 Spreader Canal, C-111 South Dade Project, and other water control infrastructure; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District are the federal and local sponsors, respectively, for the implementation of CERP and are actively advancing the planning, construction, and operations of numerous restoration projects that stand to impact Florida Bay and the southern coastal system; and

WHEREAS, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection are members of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (Task Force) that is responsible for information sharing, facilitating conflict resolution, coordinating science and research associated with restoration, and providing support to agencies and entities involved in restoration activities; 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, public health, and environment; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS Water Quality Protection Program (WQPP) has identified addressing South Florida regional influences on water quality as a top priority, including the need to actively engage with the Task Force to restore the quantity, quality, timing and distribution of freshwater flow within the Greater Everglades ecosystem;

WHEREAS, the FKNMS and NOAA have identified the need to restore the coral reefs of the Florida Keys, partly through the implementation of the \$100,000,000 Mission: Iconic Reefs project, the success of which depends on clean, clear, oligotrophic waters within the FKNMS.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council agrees to create a Working Group entitled: The Florida Keys and South Florida Ecosystem Connectivity Team, which aims to:

- a) Inform and engage members of the SAC, WQPP and the Florida Keys community in South Florida Ecosystem Restoration by providing regular updates at meetings, facilitating dialogue, and generating recommendations that can be made on behalf of the SAC and WQPP to decision makers.
- b) Ensure the interests of the FKNMS are represented in South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force and other relevant decision-making processes by staying involved in ongoing activities, including opportunities for public participation and engagement, and providing direct input from the SAC and WQPP to the NOAA Task Force representatives and other relevant agencies and decision makers as needed.
- c) Facilitate regular participation by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District at working group, SAC and WQPP meetings to allow information sharing and dialogue.

- d) Provide a platform for collaboration between members of the SAC, WQPP and Florida Keys community on South Florida Ecosystem Restoration and other South Florida regional issues of mutual interest and most urgent importance to the Florida Keys.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council is an interactive liaison between the residents and visitors of the Florida Keys and the staff and management of the FKNMS. The opinions and finding 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.