



NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION®

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August 14, 2013

The Honorable Jay Rockefeller
Chairman, Committee on
Commerce, Science and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Thune
Ranking Member, Committee on
Commerce, Science and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

The Honorable Marco Rubio
United States Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

Re: Restoring Freshwater Flows to the Apalachicola River and Apalachicola Bay

Dear Chairman Rockefeller, Ranking Member Thune, Senator Nelson and Senator Rubio:

On behalf of our more than four million members and supporters, the National Wildlife Federation thanks the Committee for calling attention to the dire plight of the Apalachicola River and Bay and calls on Congress to take action this year to prevent further destruction of Florida's environment and economy. We urge Congress to enact legislation requiring the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) river system to be managed so that the Apalachicola River and Bay will receive the freshwater flows they need to support, restore, and reestablish a thriving ecosystem, healthy populations of fish and wildlife, and a vibrant resource-based economy.

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) is the nation's largest conservation education and advocacy organization. NWF has more than four million members and supporters and conservation affiliate organizations in forty-eight states and territories. NWF has a long history of working to protect the nation's inland and coastal waters and the fish and wildlife that depend on those vital resources.

For decades, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has managed the ACF river system in a way that keeps vital freshwater flows from reaching the Apalachicola River and Bay. Continuation of this status quo is neither sustainable nor acceptable. As Florida's Deputy Secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection recently told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, "the ecosystem and, indeed, the very way of life for generations of Floridians will be devastated."

The Apalachicola River is the lifeblood of the extraordinarily productive Apalachicola Bay, and the Bay is strongly influenced by the amount, timing, and duration of freshwater flowing from the Apalachicola River. Lack of freshwater flows have led to the collapse of the Bay's rich oyster population, pushing oyster production on commercially important reefs to their lowest levels in 20 years with many reefs no

longer able to support commercial harvesting. This collapse has resulted in a devastating loss of income for the region, compelling Florida's Governor Scott to seek a federal declaration of a fishery resource disaster to help alleviate the economic hardship. Lack of sufficient freshwater flows have endangered the Apalachicola River as well, leading to the loss of millions of trees in the river's floodplain and harming tourism, recreation, and businesses that rely on a healthy Apalachicola River.

The economic implications are significant. The commercial and recreational fishing industries that rely on a healthy Apalachicola River and Bay contribute almost \$400 million to the regional economy and directly support 85 percent of the local population. Sufficient freshwater flows are essential for maintaining the salinity regimes needed to sustain an economically viable oyster harvest from the Apalachicola Bay, and for sustaining many other commercially viable fisheries. Sufficient freshwater flows are also critical for maintaining the estimated \$5 billion in free services provided to Floridians by the River and Bay, including clean water, flood protection, and fish and wildlife habitat.

It is clear that Congress must take action if the situation is to change. Decades of costly litigation and negotiations among the states have not resolved the problem. Repeated calls to the Army Corps to account for the needs of Florida when managing the ACF have gone unanswered. Instead, the ACF continues to be managed to benefit upstream users at the expense of Florida's economy and environment, and the ecological health of the Apalachicola River and Bay continues to decline.

Immediate action is needed to change this untenable situation. While a number of legislative solutions have been offered, the only solution that will change the status quo and solve the crisis facing the Apalachicola River and Bay before it is too late is legislation developed by Senator Nelson that would require the Corps to manage the ACF system to ensure that the Apalachicola River and Bay receive sufficient freshwater flows to maintain clean water, thriving commercial and recreational fisheries, and a healthy resource-based economy.

The National Wildlife Federation calls on the Committee and Congress to ensure that this Freshwater Flows provision is enacted into law this Congress, either through inclusion in any final Water Resources Development Act that may be signed into law or as part of another legislative vehicle. We look forward to working with you on this important effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Larry Schweiger', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Larry Schweiger
President and CEO

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
The Honorable Steve Southerland