

Representative Steve Southerland, II (FL-2)
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard
Hearing entitled,

"Effect of Water Flows on Apalachicola Bay: Short and Long Term Perspectives"

Tuesday, August 13th, 2013

11:00AM EDT

Senators Rubio and Nelson, I want to thank you for holding this timely hearing on the impact of low freshwater flows from the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) River System on Apalachicola Bay. As the Member of Congress representing the City of Apalachicola, I have seen firsthand the devastating impact of reduced downstream flows on this community's ecosystem, environment, and economy.

Additionally, I would like to express my appreciation to Governor Scott – who has been an incredible leader and tireless advocate in our collective efforts to revive Apalachicola's collapsed Bay and save this national treasure.

Historically, Apalachicola Bay has provided more than 90% of Florida's oyster harvest and nearly 10% of the nation's oyster supply, serving as a major economic driver for the state. The

low flows from the ACF system have decimated the local oyster industry, and, by extension, Apalachicola and the surrounding North Florida region that depend on the industry's success.

In May 2013, I authored a letter on behalf of the Florida Congressional delegation to House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Shuster and Ranking Member Rahall expressing our concerns regarding the present situation in Apalachicola Bay. We understand that the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) is diverting limited and precious freshwater to the metro-Atlanta area, reducing flows down the ACF River System and, thereby, preventing an adequate water supply from reaching the Apalachicola River Basin and Bay in the Florida panhandle. Florida's House delegation recognizes the need for swift and decisive action to preserve Apalachicola Bay's oyster industry, and we have requested that a legislative solution be included in the House Water Resources Development Act.

Additionally, I joined with Senators Rubio and Nelson, as well as Representatives Miller and Nugent, in September 2012, requesting that the Department of Commerce issue a fisheries disaster declaration for Florida's oyster harvesting areas in the Gulf of Mexico. In furtherance of this request, I was pleased to see that a recent report by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission concluded what we have long known, that "the rapid and unprecedented commercial oyster fishery failure on Florida's Gulf Coast was the result of upstream consumption and water management policies... which exacerbated the impact of severe drought conditions... These factors are outside of the fishery manager's control."

Recognizing that National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) disaster relief funds would allow for the further development of critical research into the causes of the Bay's collapse, as well as provide important relief to the impacted industries, I look forward to hearing from representatives of NMFS as to the status of our request.

What's more, the Corps' forthcoming updated Water Control Manual for the ACF River system is of great interest. Over twenty years of increasingly contentious litigation has been unable to provide for an adequate solution to these so-called "water wars" – one that allocated Florida its fair share of the resource. Therefore, I am particularly interested in hearing directly from the Corps on its proposed updates and expect that they will take into account the pressing and dire nature of the situation here in Apalachicola when considering changes to its draft water control plan for Lake Lanier and the entire ACF system.

Finally, Florida has proactively engaged in a wide variety of responsible conservation measures aimed at achieving more efficient management of our limited water supply. It is past time that Georgia begin to engage in similar conservation measures, and I would urge the Corps to mandate that Georgia implement such practices in their draft water control plan.

I am hopeful that this important hearing will increase Congressional awareness regarding the plight of the hardworking Floridians, many of whom are present here today, who have long made their living on these waters – and whose jobs and livelihoods are now in jeopardy.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share my views on this matter. I look forward to working with Florida's Congressional delegation, Senators, and all relevant parties to find a long-term solution to this issue that is respectful of the unique ecosystem, environment, and way of life in this treasured North Florida community.