Florida Waterkeepers Position Statement on Hurricane Irma

In the wake of Hurricane Irma, Floridians are still assessing the short-term and long-term impacts of the storm with current estimates of storm-related damages between $25 and 46 billion. As climate change intensifies, we can expect more frequent and more severe weather-related catastrophes. Absent more proactive action and investment in coastal resiliency, water quality protection, and climate adaptation planning, Florida's economy, environment, and public health will suffer.

Hurricanes and major storm events can deteriorate water quality threatening human health and the environment, particularly in Florida. Such storms generate large volumes of flood water, causing sewer and septic systems to fail, and flush large quantities of sewage and pollutants into our oceans, bays, rivers, and lakes. Nutrients, pesticides, fecal bacteria, heavy metals, petroleum products, industrial chemicals and many other contaminants enter our waterways and make them unsafe for swimming or fishing. Major storm events and the associated pollution can significantly impact local fisheries and tourism based economies, and the people and livelihoods that depend on them, often-taking months or years to recover.

Scientific projections indicate that major storm events like Hurricane Irma are likely to continue to batter and threaten the region in the coming years as storms increase in frequency and intensity. Climate change is expected to exacerbate storm impacts, dramatically increasing the risk of damage to coastal infrastructure and our clean water economy in Florida. Most notably, as sea levels rise - so do storm surge levels and impacts from flooding. While Florida's infrastructure was created with water in mind, engineers and planners in the past did not anticipate rising seas or the dramatic population growth that the state has experienced in the past 50 years. As a result, living shorelines and natural systems have been replaced with man-made seawalls, impervious surfaces, and stormwater systems that have inadvertently increased flood risk and exacerbated pollution problems.

The Waterkeepers of Florida strongly urge elected officials to fully protect our waterways, our water supply and our communities by improving and enhancing the resiliency of Florida's infrastructure and our state's ability to withstand future storms. We simply cannot afford to wait any longer to prepare for the effects of climate change which are evident today. Florida's future depends on local and state leadership committed to protecting our economy, communities, ecosystems, and public health before, during, and after major storms. Therefore, Florida Waterkeeper organizations urge state and local leaders to protect our water by taking the following actions:

- Comprehensively Audit and Assess Florida's Infrastructure Vulnerabilities
    - Conduct Vulnerability Assessments to identify necessary improvements to reduce flooding, sewage overflows, property losses, and power outages including potential of solar panels and batteries for sewer facility power resilience.
    - Conduct a post-storm utility audit to evaluate technical failures, power outages, sewage overflows, and flooding issues that occurred throughout the state.
    - Complete necessary improvements to infrastructure that failed during Hurricane Irma.
- Implement Best Management Practices to Harden Infrastructure and Protect Natural Systems
    - Prioritize green infrastructure, living shorelines, and sustainable development practices and growth management policies that preserve critical floodplains, require ample wetland buffers and setbacks, and steer development towards areas that are less vulnerable to impacts from storm events and sea level rise.
    - Protect and restore wetlands and mangroves, the least expensive buffers to sea level rise and extreme weather events.
- Require sound planning principles that must be used to eliminate inappropriate and unsafe development in the coastal areas when opportunities arise. (Florida Statute 163.3178)