

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0917**

December 20, 2016

Mr. Cameron Clayton  
CEO and General Manager  
The Weather Channel, Inc.  
300 Interstate N Pkwy SE, Suite 300  
Atlanta, GA 30339

Dear Mr. Clayton:

I am writing in regards to the Weather Channel's recently-released article and documentary "Toxic Lake," which discusses the current environmental and economic crisis surrounding Lake Okeechobee. As a resident of Okeechobee and having represented Okeechobee County, FL in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly eight years, I have learned that to fully understand the complex water issues involving the Lake, you must consider the perspective of scientists, the agriculture industry, environmental organizations, state and federal agencies and from those who have lived on or around the Lake their whole lives. I find the lack of balance in the Weather Channel's recent coverage of Lake Okeechobee disconcerting, particularly coming from a news organization devoted to unbiased, fact-based, educationally-minded reporting.

The central question this piece appears to ask is: Why does the agriculture industry outweigh the needs of Florida's coastal economy in political importance? The premise of this question is fundamentally flawed. There's no question that tourism is a key component of Florida's economy, as evidenced by the longstanding bipartisan support for policies that help our state continue to attract visitors from all over the world. However, our state's economy is not built on one tent pole, and the farmers and ranchers who live and work in the center of the state understand that as well as the coastal residents.

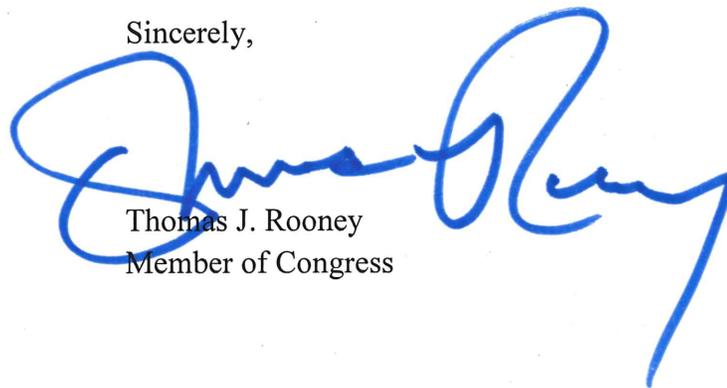
Florida has been obsessed with water quality for years, and we take environmental stewardship very seriously. Without the highest quality inputs – water, soil, air – Florida's agricultural community wouldn't be able to produce the highest quality outputs – beef, citrus, fruits and vegetables. There is no reason to assume that our farmers and ranchers want to pollute the land upon which their livelihood depends, just as charter fishermen wouldn't want to overfish their favorite spots.

Clearly, there are many factors involved in the creation of these harmful algae blooms, but excluded from your piece is the line of questioning surrounding the impact of urban sprawl. Had your coverage included findings from the South Florida Water Management District – the state-run authoritative and scientifically-backed voice in water quality management in this part of the state – your piece may have cited the legitimate environmental impact of the deposits from the aging septic systems along the St. Lucie River. This point is not without merit, since nearly all of South Florida has benefited from the altered flow of the Everglades’ “River of Grass”, which has provided dry land for residents to live along the canals and shores of both the East and West coasts, as well as for the Everglades agricultural area.

I have been working since I was elected to ensure that the Army Corps of Engineers receives ample funding to fulfill its 100 percent federal commitment to complete construction of the Herbert Hoover Dike to both limit the rate of discharges and protect residents from devastating flooding. The Dike, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and other critical water quality projects suffer from anything but a lack of “sense of urgency” among lawmakers – although many throw out this accusation for purely political purposes. Ensuring these projects are completed on schedule is as critical to the residents in the center of the state as it is to the residents on the coasts, the millions of visitors our state welcomes every year, and the numerous unique birds and fish that call South Florida home.

The bottom line is simple: 2016 was a very tough year for South Florida, but your piece unapologetically and completely distorts the full story of the Lake and its interaction with the communities around it. Lake Okeechobee is one of the premier freshwater fishing destinations in the country, and I am proud to have this beautiful and essential part of Florida right in my backyard. Every time I take my three sons out fishing on the Lake, I’m constantly reminded of the great responsibility I have to protect it and the livelihoods it supports. We know that it requires the cooperation amongst all the residents in the watershed to support and maintain healthy water, and stories like yours that neglect or outright reject the full picture do nothing to promote a healthy dialogue or positive solutions to a common problem.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Rooney  
Member of Congress