

# PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

## **PURPOSE**

---

The purpose of this document is to describe the existing federal and nonfederal programs designed to restore and sustain the imperiled South Florida ecosystem. The American people have a strong national as well as local interest in preserving this 18,000-square-mile region of subtropical uplands, wetlands, and coral reefs that extends from the Chain of Lakes south of Orlando through the reefs southwest of the Florida Keys. The South Florida ecosystem not only supports the economy and the distinctive quality of life of the Floridians and the Native American Indians who live there, but also greatly enriches the shared legacy of all Americans. It encompasses many nationally significant conservation areas, including Everglades and Biscayne National Parks, Big Cypress National Preserve, the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Many federal, state, tribal, and local entities are working to address the deteriorating ecological conditions in South Florida. The South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (the task force) coordinates and tracks the work. Congress directed the task force to produce a restoration strategy. This document provides the information needed to coordinate and integrate the restoration effort.

Congress identified four elements to be included in this document. They wanted it to outline how the restoration effort will occur, identify the resources needed, establish responsibility for accomplishing actions, and link the strategic goals established by the participants to outcome-oriented goals (see appendix A). This document describes how the restoration effort is being coordinated: The task force members have agreed upon a vision for the results; they have established three broad goals and measurable objectives for the work that needs to be accomplished to achieve that vision; they have

identified the projects needed to achieve the objectives; they are coordinating those projects so that they are mutually supportive and nonduplicative; and they are tracking progress toward both the work-oriented goals and the results-oriented vision. This strategy, along with the vision, goals, objectives, performance measures, and individual project data (including cost, responsible agency, and targeted completion dates) are all included in this document.

This strategy document is for planning purposes only, is subject to modification, and is not legally binding on any of the task force members. Each task force member and the interests they represent retain all of their sovereign rights, authorities, and jurisdiction for implementation of the projects contained within this document.

## **WHO IS INVOLVED: SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION TASK FORCE**

---

Six federal departments (twelve agencies), seven Florida state agencies or commissions, two American Indian tribes, sixteen counties, scores of municipal governments, and interested groups and businesses from throughout South Florida participate in the restoration effort. Four sovereign entities (federal, state, and two tribes) are represented. The task force sought extensive involvement from local agencies, citizen groups, nonprofit organizations, and other interested parties as part of its assessment for this strategy.

The South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force was created in 1993 as a federal interagency partnership, with informal participation by the State of Florida, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida. The Water Resources Development Act of 1996 authorized the operation of the task force and provided for specific membership and duties (see appendix B). The act expanded the role of the task force to include the following duties:

- Facilitate the resolution of interagency and inter-governmental conflicts associated with the restoration of the South Florida ecosystem among agencies and entities represented on the task force.
- Coordinate research associated with the restoration.
- Provide assistance and support to agencies and entities represented.
- Prepare an integrated financial plan and recommendations for coordinated budget requests to be expended by agencies and entities on the task force.
- Submit a biennial report to Congress that summarizes the restoration activities.

Pursuant to its statutory duties, a task force working group of agency and tribal representatives (the working group) works to resolve conflicts among participants, coordinate research, assist participants, prepare an integrated financial plan, and report to Congress. The task force does not have any oversight or project authority, and participating agencies are responsible for meeting their own targeted accomplishments. The task force's role as a forum in which ideas are shared and consensus is sought enhances the productivity of each member government or agency effort.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT**

---

Early land developers viewed the Everglades and related habitats as worthless swamps. By the late 1800s efforts were underway to "reclaim" these swamplands for productive use. These initial efforts were encouraging, and more wetlands were drained for agriculture and for residential and commercial development. Little by little, canals, roads, and buildings began to displace native habitats.

In 1934 national concern about the degradation of the South Florida Everglades led to the creation of Everglades National Park. The portion of the Everglades included in the park was to be permanently reserved as a wilderness with no development that would interfere with preserving the unique flora and fauna and the essential primitive character existing at the date of enactment. This mandate to preserve wilderness is one of the strongest in the National Park System. The park was authorized by Congress in 1934 and opened to the public in 1947.

Meanwhile the region was plagued with both hurricanes and droughts. A 1928 hurricane caused Lake Okeechobee to overflow, drowning approximately 2,400 people. Droughts from 1931 to 1945 lowered groundwater levels, creating serious threats of saltwater intrusion into wells. In 1947 successive storms left 90 percent of South Florida—more than 16,000 square miles from south of Orlando to the Keys—under water.

In 1948 the ongoing efforts to drain the Everglades, protect the region from hurricanes, and make the region habitable culminated in the congressional authorization of the Central & Southern Florida (C&SF) Project, a flood control project jointly built and managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). The primary project goal was to provide water and flood control for urban and agricultural lands. Another goal was to ensure a water supply for Everglades National Park. The first goal was achieved. The project succeeded in draining half of the original Everglades and allowing for expansion of the cities on the lower east coast of Florida and the farming area south of Lake Okeechobee known as the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA). The second goal has not yet been accomplished. The correct quantity, quality, timing, and distribution of water to the Greater Everglades ecosystem have been the subject of much study. Many projects have been undertaken to restore natural water flows to this region.

The C&SF Project significantly altered the region's hydrology (quantity, timing, and distribution of water). Whereas historically most rainwater had soaked into the region's wetlands, the C&SF canal system, comprised of over 1,800 miles of canals and levees and 200 water control structures, drained an average of approximately 1.7 billion gallons of water per day into the ocean and the gulf. As a result, not enough water was available for the natural functioning of the Everglades or for the communities in the region. Water quality also was degraded. Phosphorus runoff from agriculture and other sources polluted much of the northern Everglades and Lake Okeechobee and caused key changes to the food chain.

During the 1970s and 1980s public policy, in line with predominant public opinion, moved in the direction of environmental protection and restoration in South Florida. For example, in 1972 the Florida Legislature passed the Florida Water Resources Act to balance human and natural system water resource needs. In the same year, the Florida Land and Water Conservation Act was enacted to protect lands for environmental protection and recreation. In 1983, under the leadership of Governor Bob Graham, the Save Our Everglades program was initiated to protect and restore the Kissimmee River Basin, Lake Okeechobee, the state-managed water conservation areas, Big Cypress Swamp, Everglades National Park, Florida Bay, and endangered wildlife. In 1987 the Florida Legislature passed the Surface Water Improvement and Management Act (SWIM) to clean up all waters affected by Florida water management districts. In 1989 Congress passed the Everglades Expansion and Protection Act, which added 107,600 acres to Everglades National Park and called for increased and improved water flows to the park.

Despite progress toward restoration in the 1980s, dramatic growth in the population and development of South Florida kept pressure on the environment. Research at this time reflected declines in many native plant and animal

species and heightened phosphorus pollution of the Everglades. Of particular alarm was evidence of the decline of Florida Bay, indicated by dramatic losses in sea grass habitat, algae blooms, reductions in shrimp and many fish species, and a decline in water clarity.

In 1988 the federal government sued the State of Florida over its failure to protect the Everglades from pollution. After three years and much additional litigation no settlement was reached. In 1991 the newly elected governor, Lawton Chiles, agreed to reach a settlement. For several years mediation efforts led to a reduction in the range of conflict between the state and federal governments and between agricultural and environmental interests. In February 1992 a court settlement was achieved to reduce the level of phosphorus entering Everglades National Park and the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge by creating artificial wetlands to filter polluted agricultural wastewater. In 1993 the sugar cane industry agreed to adopt the best management practices available and to pay for approximately one-third of the costs of the artificial wetlands to help reduce the phosphorous pollution in the Everglades. The settlement also called for additional measures to be implemented over the long term to meet final numeric water quality standards. In 1994 the agreements developed as a result of litigation and mediation were reflected in the Everglades Forever Act adopted by the Florida Legislature.

The mid-1990s saw the establishment of two important consensus building forums for Everglades issues. In 1993 the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force was established through an interagency agreement. (Refer to the discussion of the task force on pages 6-7). The task force was formalized and expanded to include tribal, state, and local governments by the 1996 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA 1996). In 1994 the governor of Florida established the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida "to develop recommendations and public support for regaining a healthy Everglades ecosystem

with sustainable economies and quality communities." The task force and the governor's commission have been instrumental in formulating consensus for Everglades restoration.

In 1996 two significant pieces of legislation were approved by the U.S. Congress. The Farm Bill provided \$200 million to conduct restoration activities in the Everglades ecosystem including land acquisition, resource protection, and resource maintenance. The WRDA 1996 clarified congressional guidance to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop a comprehensive review study for restoring the hydrology of South Florida. This study, commonly referred to as the Restudy, has resulted in the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* (CERP), a consensus plan that is the basis of current legislation that will authorize initial restoration projects. The CERP is designed to reverse unintended consequences resulting from the operation of the Central and Southern Florida Project. The physical limitations of the existing water management system can exacerbate resource conflicts. Implementation of the CERP should increase flexibility for water managers to help avoid such conflicts.

The growing body of federal and nonfederal legislation and regulatory approvals directed at managing growth and protecting the natural environment is summarized below:

- 1972 Florida Water Resources Act established fundamental water policy for Florida, attempting to meet human needs and sustain natural systems; put in place a comprehensive strategic program to preserve and restore the Everglades ecosystem.
- 1972 Florida Land Conservation Act authorized the issuance of bonds to purchase environmentally endangered and recreation lands.
- 1983 Governor's Save Our Everglades Program recognized that the entire ecosystem should be restored and protected; initiated Kissimmee River Restoration Project.
- 1984 Florida Warren Henderson Act authorized the Department of Environmental Regulation (now the Department of Environmental Protection) to protect the state's wetlands and surface waters for public interest.
- 1985 Florida Local Government Comprehensive Planning and Land Development Regulation Act required the development and coordination of local land use plans.
- 1987 Compact amongst the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the State of Florida and the South Florida Water Management District completed.
- 1987 Florida Surface Water Improvement and Management Act required the five Florida water management districts to develop plans to clean up and preserve Florida lakes, bays, estuaries, and rivers.
- 1988 Land Settlement Act of 1987 transferred acreage in WC-A3 and the Rotenberger Tract to the State of Florida for Everglades restoration.
- 1990 Florida Preservation 2000 Act established a coordinated land acquisition program to protect the integrity of ecological systems and to provide multiple benefits, including the preservation of fish and wildlife habitat, recreation space, and water recharge areas.
- 1990 Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act established a 2,800 square-nautical-mile marine sanctuary and authorized a water quality protection program.
- 1991 Florida Everglades Protection Act provided the South Florida Water Management District with clear tools for ecosystem restoration.
- 1992 Water Resources Development Act authorized the Kissimmee River Restoration Project and the Central and Southern Florida Project Restudy.

- *1993* Federal South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force established to coordinate ecosystem restoration efforts in South Florida.
- *1994* Florida Everglades Forever Act outlined a comprehensive plan to restore significant portions of the South Florida ecosystem through construction, research, and regulation.
- *1994* Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida established to make recommendations for achieving a healthy South Florida ecosystem that can coexist with and mutually support a sustainable economy and quality communities.
- *1994* Miccosukee Tribe approved by EPA to establish water quality standards for reservation lands in accordance with Section 518 of the Clean Water Act.
- *1996* Water Resources Development Act authorized a comprehensive review study for restoring the hydrology of South Florida; expanded the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force to include tribal, state, and local governments, mandated extensive public involvement, and allowed the task force to address the full scope of restoration needs (natural and built).
- *1996* Section 390 of the Farm Bill directly appropriated \$200 million to conduct restoration activities in the Everglades ecosystem in South Florida.
- *1997* Seminole Tribe of Florida's water quality standards for the Big Cypress Reservation approved by USEPA.
- *1997* Miccosukee Tribe water quality standards established for tribal lands located in WCA-3A. Standards established 10 ppb criteria for total phosphorus in tribal waters.
- *1997-2000* 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000 Interior Appropriations Acts provided for land acquisition by the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service in the Everglades ecosystem.
- *1998* Seminole Tribe of Florida's water quality standards for the Brighton Reservation approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.
- *1999* *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* submitted to Congress, outlining 68 infrastructure projects to modify the current water delivery system and improve the quantity, quality, timing, and distribution of water to the natural system; estimated total cost of \$7.8 billion to be shared on a 50-50 basis by the federal and non-federal sponsors.
- *1999* Water Resources Development Act extended Critical Restoration Project authority until 2003; authorized two pilot infrastructure projects proposed in the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan*
- *1999* Governor's Commission for the Everglades appointed to advise the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force on issues relating to Everglades protection and restoration, environmental justice, and water resource protection, among other issues.
- *1999* Miccosukee water quality standards approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.
- *1999* Miccosukee Reserved Area Act directed Miccosukee Tribe to establish water quality standards for the Miccosukee Reserved Area (inflow points to Everglades National Park).
- *1999* Miccosukee Tribe water quality standards established for water passing through the Miccosukee Reserved Area, into Everglades National Park.
- *2000* Florida Everglades Restoration Investment Act created a funding and accountability plan to help implement the *Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan* \$1.6 billion in state funding committed to Everglades restoration.

● 2000 Water Resources Development Act (proposed legislation) includes \$1.7 billion in authorizations for the first round of Everglades infrastructure projects and pilot projects; proposes programmatic authority for projects with immediate and substantial restoration benefits.

## **WHAT IS AT STAKE**

---

Current efforts to restore the South Florida ecosystem must address a century of changes to the environment that have put the ecosystem in jeopardy. Evidence of the seriousness of the problem includes

- Fifty percent reduction in the original extent of the Everglades, including important habitat and groundwater recharge areas
- Ninety percent reductions in wading bird populations
- Sixty-nine species on the federal endangered or threatened list
- Declines in commercial fisheries in Biscayne and Florida Bays
- Loss of over five feet of organic soil in the Everglades Agricultural Area
- Fifty percent decline in the clarity of water in the Florida Keys
- Infestations of exotic plant species on over 1.5 million acres
- Damaging freshwater releases into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries
- Loss of 40,000 acres of grass beds in Lake Okeechobee
- Loss of tree islands and damaging ecological effects in the state-managed water conservation areas
- Nineteen percent decline in living corals in the last decade

Today South Florida is home to 6.5 million people, and the population is expected to double by 2050. The region also receives more than 37 million tourists annually. The quality of life in South Florida and the region's \$200 billion economy depend on the health and vitality of the natural system. If the coral reefs, estuaries, and shallow waters of Florida Bay cannot support populations of aquatic species, South Florida's tourism industry and associated economy will decline. The loss of fertile soil and conversion of land to nonagricultural uses will make farming and ranching harder to maintain and less profitable.

The stakes are high. The South Florida ecosystem once supported some of the greatest biodiversity on earth. The biological abundance and the aesthetic values of the natural system warrant regional, national, and even international interest and concern. In addition to numerous local parks and private conservation areas, South Florida encompasses thirty state parks, seventeen state aquatic preserves, eleven federal wildlife refuges, four national parks, a national marine sanctuary, and a national estuarine research reserve. Everglades National Park has been designated a World Heritage Site, a Wetland of International Significance, and an International Biosphere Reserve. Biosphere reserves are protected examples of the world's major ecosystem types, which are intended to serve as standards for measuring human impacts on the environment worldwide.