

SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION TASK FORCE

and

GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOUTH FLORIDA

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

All government and non-government programs are concerned about public outreach and participation, so what is different about the document you have in your hand? *Our situation in South Florida is unique because we are dealing with one of the world's largest and most complex ecosystem restoration programs, and if it does not succeed South Florida "will not be sustainable."* Our situation is unusually compelling because of the area's large population (fourth largest population center in the United States), and exceptionally high growth rate (expected to double by 2020). This creates a rapidly diminishing land base available for development (some areas are already "built out"), in an area constrained by large bodies of salt water on three sides and wetlands in the center. All these factors converge as extraordinary demands placed on our natural and built environments. A continuing supply of visitors (Southeast Florida alone accounts for over one-third of the state's 41 million visitors per year) and new and part-time residents (800 people a day) requires constant educational efforts, among a population that is exceptionally diverse in culture, language, age and interests. Our overall success in ecosystem restoration is dependent on how well we involve the public in all our endeavors.

We also have the distinction of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (Task Force) and its Florida-based Working Group, entities that have successfully brought 27 government organizations together to coordinate their many complex programs. The Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida (Governor's Commission) has also succeeded in reaching consensus on many important issues among its diverse membership of non-government stakeholder and government representatives.

We also have the benefit of a ground swell of public support in Florida and among informed citizens nationwide, and bipartisan support in political circles. But the situation in South Florida is unusually dynamic, and we must not be complacent. The strengths of the Task Force, Working Group, the Governor's Commission, and others, are now being incorporated into this joint public outreach and participation effort. Much can be done through the member organizations of our partnership. More can be done if we combine resources and talents, and request more help through creative partnerships and new funding. If we are to succeed in restoring South Florida and ensuring its sustainability, then it depends in large part on the involvement and commitment of Florida, the nation and the world.

BACKGROUND

The Task Force was first formed in 1993 and codified by Congress in the Water Resources Development Act of 1996. Its membership includes representatives of federal, state, regional, local and tribal governments who are working together to restore the South Florida environment while providing for a sustainable economy and quality communities. To accomplish this charge, the Task Force recognizes the mutual dependency between natural systems and healthy, sustainable economies and employs an

ecosystem management approach in its deliberations and work products. An ecosystem management approach attempts to restore and sustain the health, productivity, and biological diversity of ecosystems and the overall quality of life through natural resource management that is fully integrated with social and economic factors. The Task Force provides high-level policy and guidance for its Florida-based Working Group, which is made up primarily of the top managers in South Florida for each of the organizations represented on the Task Force. The Task Force has formally adopted the Governor's Commission as its primary advisory body of stakeholder representatives.

The Governor's Commission is a bipartisan body appointed by the Governor to various stakeholder interests of South Florida. Their charge is to "improve coordination among and within the private and public sectors regarding activities impacting the Everglades Ecosystem..." and to "recommend strategies for ensuring the South Florida economy is based on sustainable economic activities that can coexist with a healthy Everglades Ecosystem..."

The Task Force and its Working Group, and the Governor's Commission, share the responsibility to promote public involvement in and awareness of the need to direct South Florida toward an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable future. This includes engaging our stakeholders in dialogue and eliciting input for the many decisions that affect stakeholders and the public at large.

MISSION

This public outreach and participation strategy is designed to further the missions of the Task Force and the Governor's Commission.

The mission of the Task Force is "to achieve, in cooperation with all interested parties, the restoration, preservation and protection of the ecosystem while promoting a sustainable South Florida."

The Governor's Commission states in its 'Initial Report' (October 1, 1995), that its mission is "to develop recommendations and public support for regaining a healthy Everglades ecosystem with a sustainable economy and quality communities."

MESSAGE

The success of this outreach strategy depends on the promotion and realization of these similar missions with a universal message. The Task Force, Working Group and Governor's Commission, as well as their respective members, need to voice a consistent and shared message for public outreach and education purposes:

"WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE AND PROTECT SOUTH FLORIDA'S ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY, AND QUALITY OF LIFE FOR THIS AND FUTURE GENERATIONS."

GOAL

Our goal is broad-based understanding and long-term support by residents, visitors and national interests for actions to restore, protect and sustain South Florida. At the same time, this strategy must effectively engage the public and create a dialogue concerning the decisions and actions that affect them and direct those comments to the responsible decision-makers. Finally, the strategy should allow the Working Group and Governor's Commission to evaluate the success in reaching their ultimate goal of broad-based understanding and support.

OVERALL STRATEGY

While the task is large and complex, we believe this process is fundamental. In order to achieve our goals and objectives, the Task Force, Working Group, and Governor's Commission will facilitate a collaborative attitude among our members to make full and effective use of resources, find ways to create alliances and networks, and empower others to move ahead. Our strategy is to utilize public outreach, education and involvement activities, assume responsibility to ensure that these activities happen, and serve as a catalyst for action. Because the Task Force and Governor's Commission share similar missions and the responsibility to promote public involvement, and the principles and tasks to accomplish public engagement are the same, this strategy is for both groups.

OVERVIEW

This public outreach and participation strategy provides both a framework and a methodology to meet the public engagement goals of the Task Force and the Governor's Commission. Both groups use adaptive management to evaluate and modify their work plans to take advantage of new information or opportunities that arise, so this strategy will be updated accordingly.

FRAMEWORK

To more clearly articulate and focus the "approach" of the outreach strategy, it is divided into five "tiers." Each tier represents an avenue for promoting our common efforts and ensuring a two-way exchange of information between the public and decision-makers. The five tiers move from easy to complex, familiar to unfamiliar, inexpensive to expensive, with mechanisms to be identified for each tier for both external and internal constituencies.

The five tiers for reaching both our external and internal constituencies are:

TIER 1: IMPROVED STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

The Working Group and Governor's Commission continually improve the way they do business and communicate in order to enhance the engagement and two-way information exchange with their respective members and with the public. Some examples of improved procedures include refining news releases and their distribution, opportunities for public comment at meetings, electronic mail, availability of meeting minutes, and connecting with the community leaders where we hold our business meetings.

TIER 2: EXPAND MEMBER ORGANIZATION PROGRAMS

Member organizations of the Working Group and Governor's Commission commit to include information regarding the broader restoration efforts within their respective public and employee education and outreach programs. This could include company newsletters and direct mailings that go out to their organization's mailing list and employees, organizational magazines, employee training, and expanded interpretive and environmental education efforts.

TIER 3: DEVELOP JOINT SPONSORED PROGRAMS

Member organizations explore creative outreach opportunities through jointly sponsored projects or pooled funding. Opportunities could include jointly funded video projects, or traveling booth displays for conferences and festivals.

TIER 4: FOCUS ON SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

The Working Group and the Governor's Commission develop individual outreach strategies for their various specific initiatives that have a potential for broader public engagement. An example is the Governor's Commission's effort to assist elected local officials to adopt a resolution in support of the Conceptual Plan for the Central & Southern Florida Project Restudy (this work was done by the Governor's Commission's Boundaries and Buffers Committee). These special initiatives could be under the leadership of the Working Group or Governor's Commission, a member organization, or a community.

TIER 5: UTILIZE PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The Working Group and Governor's Commission connect with, expand, or create new public/private partnerships to improve two-way information exchange with the public. Partnerships could include linkages with organizations throughout the region, such as the Museum of Discovery and Science; the Eastward Ho! Brownfields Partnership; the St. Thomas University Healing the Earth Center; or various South Florida Universities.

IMPLEMENTATION

Following approval of this framework by the Task Force and Governor's Commission, an implementation plan will be developed. The implementation plan will focus on the workplan for 1999 and resource requirements for 2000 and beyond.