



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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1949-1960: The Early Years as a Flood Control District



The first Governing Board of the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District – predecessor of the South Florida Water Management District – met for the first time on July 14, 1949.

West Palm Beach, FL – As part of its 60th anniversary celebration, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) today focused on the agency's early years as a flood control district during a presentation at the March meeting of the Governing Board in Clewiston.

Following widespread regional flooding in the 1940s, Floridians appealed to the federal government to develop a flood protection plan to help them cope with the impacts of

the state's weather extremes. The U.S. Congress responded the following year by authorizing the Central and Southern Florida (C&SF) Project, a massive system of flood control works designed to harness and control water flow across a 16,000-square-mile area.

In 1949, the Florida Legislature created a multi-county agency known as the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District (FCD) – the SFWMD's predecessor – to serve as the local sponsor for the C&SF Project. The Legislature charged the FCD with:

- Acquiring land needed for construction of facilities associated with the Project;
- Taking on operation and maintenance of the water management system to be built by the United States Army Corps of Engineers, with the exception of the works of Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie Canal, the Caloosahatchee River and the main spillways in the Water Conservation Areas;
- Assuming the responsibilities of smaller, local agencies, such as the Everglades Drainage District and the Okeechobee Flood Control District.

The newly formed FCD was charged primarily with providing flood protection, unlike today's multi-faceted SFWMD that also manages South Florida's water supply, improves water quality and restores natural systems. The agency's original boundaries followed the design of the flood control system; not the natural, hydrologic and geographic features used by Florida's current water management districts. At the time, the population in the area was estimated at 800,000, and the C&SF Project was designed to serve a projected future population of 2 million. Today, more than 7.5 million people live in South Florida and are served by the District.

The Flood Control District's five-member non-salaried Governing Board held its first official meeting in downtown West Palm Beach on July 14, 1949. A month later, the Governing Board chairman recommended periodically holding meetings at other locations throughout the region to ensure that local communities had the opportunity to learn about the agency's work. That policy has been followed ever since, as demonstrated by today's meeting in Clewiston and future meetings scheduled for later this year in Kissimmee, Collier County and Key Largo.

Between 1950 and 1960, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dug 128 miles of canals and improved or built 300 miles of levees. During that time, the East Coast Protective Levee was completed, protecting cities on the east coast from flooding while creating water storage in the newly formed Water Conservation Areas. Work was also completed on a network of canals and levees in the Everglades Agricultural Area, creating close to 700,000 acres of rich peat and muck soil for farming.

In its first five years of existence, the Flood Control District did its part for the C&SF Project by acquiring through title or easement 867,313 acres needed for construction and

water storage. The acquired land, which cost \$1.5 million, included Everglades wetlands in the Water Conservation Areas.

An optimistic schedule for the C&SF Project called for the public works features to be completed within 10 years at a cost of \$200 million. As of 1960, \$68 million had been expended, and only 20 percent of the work was complete.

Meanwhile, Florida's population was booming, increasing from 3 million to 5 million over the previous decade. Turner Wallis, the Flood Control District's first executive director (1949 to 1956), called for stepping up the pace of the Project, underscoring the importance of making sure future work would be in tune with the needs of the day.

For more information on the history of the District, please visit www.sfwmd.gov throughout the year.

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About the South Florida Water Management District – [Celebrating 60 Years \(1949-2009\)](#)

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.