



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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Ranchland to Become Wetland to Improve Lake Okeechobee Water *SFWMD expands water quality improvement efforts in the Northern Everglades*



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West Palm Beach, FL — In a continuing effort to improve water quality in Lake Okeechobee and America's Everglades, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is set to transform the Lakeside Ranch into a wetland that will clean stormwater runoff before it reaches the lake known as the liquid heart of Florida.

The future Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) on the northeast shore of Lake Okeechobee is among the newest additions to the District's expanding network of water quality projects and a key component of the 2007 Northern Everglades & Estuaries Protection Program. The landmark state effort expanded the Lake Okeechobee Protection Act to strengthen protection for the Northern Everglades, recognizing the importance of capturing and cleaning water before it flows into Lake Okeechobee and the connectivity of the entire Everglades ecosystem.

"Cleaning the water through a stormwater treatment area before it reaches Lake Okeechobee is critical to the lake's ecological health," said SFWMD Governing Board Chair Eric Buermann. "A cleaner lake provides many benefits to the Everglades, Florida's natural resources and the state's economy, which depends on a healthy

environment.”

The Northern Everglades plan seeks to improve the quality, quantity, timing and distribution of water to the natural system. The 2,700-acre Lakeside Ranch Project, strategically located in a “hot spot” for nutrients, helps meet those goals by capturing and treating stormwater runoff to remove phosphorus from the water before it reaches Lake Okeechobee. Key benefits of the project also include:

- Removing up to 19 metric tons of phosphorus annually from runoff flowing into Lake Okeechobee.
- Re-circulating water from the lake through the constructed treatment area for additional phosphorus removal, further reducing the nutrient load in the lake.
- Protecting wildlife and cultural resources through a preservation area.

“I am heartened to see this construction of a living wetland that will clean water bound for Lake Okeechobee,” said State Senator Ken Pruitt. “This project represents the continued commitment of the Florida Legislature and Governor Charlie Crist to restore and protect our environment.”

The Lakeside Ranch project is designed in two phases. During the first phase, at an estimated investment of \$34.4 million, the District will construct a 925-acre treatment wetland to the north and install an inflow pump station to direct water through the STA. A southern STA and second pump station will be constructed during the second phase, at an estimated investment of \$53 million, to manage rim canal levels in Lake Okeechobee during high water flow periods. The District expects to complete the first phase of the construction by August 2011.

Stormwater Treatment Areas are the water-cleaning workhorses of Everglades restoration, naturally using plants to remove phosphorus from water flowing into the Everglades. The Lakeside Ranch joins two pilot STAs north of Lake Okeechobee. The 190-acre Taylor Creek STA became operational in June 2008 and has already removed 1.35 metric tons of phosphorus that would have otherwise entered Lake Okeechobee. The 800-acre Nubbin Slough STA is currently under construction.

Since 1994, STAs south of Lake Okeechobee – with a combined area of more than 52,000 acres – have retained more than 1,000 metric tons of phosphorus that would have otherwise entered the Everglades. Overall, Florida has invested more than \$1.8 billion to improve Everglades water quality, documenting significant progress.

The District is currently expanding several water quality improvement projects:

- In March, the SFWMD Governing Board approved an 4,656-acre expansion of treatment wetlands in southeastern Hendry County to further improve water quality flowing into the Everglades. The construction of "Compartment C" will connect two existing Stormwater Treatment Areas in the Everglades Agricultural

Area and more than double water treatment capability at the site.

- The renovation of Stormwater Treatment Area 5 in Hendry County is enhancing plant growth and water movement through the treatment marsh. In 32 days, District crews moved nearly 170,000 cubic yards, or 8,500 truckloads, of soil in STA-5, filling deeper areas so that more vegetation can take root and improve the wetland's ability to remove phosphorus from Everglades-bound waters.

More information on the Northern Everglades plan is available on the District Web site at: www.sfwmd.gov/northerneverglades. For more information about water quality improvements in the Everglades, read [*Just the Facts: Progress in Everglades Water Quality Improvements*](#) for further details.

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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.