



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

May 20, 2009

CONTACT:

Gabe Margasak

South Florida Water Management District

Office: (561) 682-2800 or Cellular: (561) 670-1245

www.sfwmd.gov/news

follow us on [twitter](#)

1970-1979: A Groundswell of Environmentalism



(Click on picture for larger version.)

In the early 1970s, environmental awareness gathers strength in Florida, highlighted by celebrations of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. In 1972, the state passes the Florida Water Resources Act, creating five regional water management districts with broadened responsibilities.

West Palm Beach, FL – As part of its ongoing celebration of 60 years of public service, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) this month is looking back at the 1970s and the origins of Florida’s regional water management districts.

The previous decade marked an active period of construction under the federal 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. The construction and modernization attracted millions of new residents to Florida, but the work also began raising concerns about damage to the environment.

By 1970, the public conscience was pushing environmental issues into the political spotlight around the world. In Florida, the groundswell of environmentalism focused on water resources. An active environmental community successfully halted construction of a proposed jetport in the Everglades and completion of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal.

In 1971, Governor Reubin Askew held a statewide conference on water management in response to a drought and other pressing environmental concerns. As an outgrowth of that event, the Florida Legislature created the state's regional water management model. Based on natural watersheds instead of political boundaries, the borders of the existing Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District (FCD) changed slightly. On January 1, 1977, the agency formally became known as the South Florida Water Management District.

Under the landmark legislation, the District's responsibilities expanded beyond flood control to also encompass water supply, water quality and natural systems protection and management. In addition, the legislation led to:

- Expansion of the SFWMD Governing Board from five members to nine
- Creation of the Big Cypress Basin and its own Governing Board
- Taxpayer approval of a statewide referendum that authorized the regional water management districts to levy ad valorem taxes to pay for their work
- Development and implementation of a regulatory program
- A draft "Water Use and Supply Development Plan," predecessor of regional water supply plans

The Legislature passed several other key environmental and growth-management laws in the 1970s, including the Environmental Land and Water Management Act, the Comprehensive Planning Act and the Land Conservation Act.

The new focus on the environment brought increased scrutiny to one of the major components of the C&SF Project, the channelization of the Kissimmee River. Among the documented negative impacts of the channelization were:

- Significant loss of fish and wildlife habitat and other ecological values
- 90 percent reduction in waterfowl and wading bird usage
- Shunting of excess water directly south to Lake Okeechobee with no floodplains to slow water flow or provide natural "filtering"

In 1976 – just five years after construction on the river was completed – the U.S. Congress passed the Kissimmee River Restoration Act, authorizing the pursuit of initiatives to restore the integrity of the river and revive lost ecological values.

Toward the end of the decade, the District experienced a major emergency management test. In late 1979, the dike around the Florida Power & Light cooling water reservoir in western Martin County failed. A 15-foot-high head of water poured through the broken dike, and 80,000 acre-feet of water derailed a passing train and flooded adjacent farms.

SFWMD crews responded before daybreak to assist with water removal. A team of engineers attributed the dike failure to underground movement of sand and water, or “piping” in the foundation. The engineers closely monitored the reconstruction of the dike, and drains and other safeguards were added to prevent future problems.

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

###

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.