



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## NEWS RELEASE

September 29, 2011

**CONTACT:**

**Randy Smith**

South Florida Water Management District

Office: (561) 682-2800 or Cellular: (561) 389-3386

[www.sfwmd.gov/news](http://www.sfwmd.gov/news)

follow us on 

### **Low Water Levels Provide Opportunity for Environmental Work** *Dry conditions allow access to areas that are typically too wet or remote*



*(Left) Aquatic plant cages have been set up along the Caloosahatchee River. (Right) Apple snail eggs were transplanted from this hatchery to Lake Okeechobee.*

**West Palm Beach, FL** — By taking advantage of low water levels that extended into the summer wet season, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) was able to complete several successful environmental enhancement projects, such as planting native trees and bulrush and stocking apple snail eggs.

“At the same time we coped with the negative effects of a drought, we also seized the opportunity to do critical environmental work that provides long-term benefits,” said SFWMD Executive Director Melissa Meeker. “Planting vegetation when nature provides the chance improves the overall ecosystem as it recovers from low water levels.”

Much of the work was completed in the spring and early summer when water levels were extremely low around Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee Estuary. After the initial work, the projects continue to be maintained as the plantings now are taking root and flourishing.

Among the efforts:

- **Trees were planted around Lake Okeechobee**, including 2,000 pond apples on the Rita Island berm, 660 cypress trees along the rim canal and 70 new cypress trees at Jaycee Park in Okeechobee.
- **Bulrush planting** was started on approximately 12 acres at the Harney Pond Canal marsh and the Clewiston Cut marsh to protect areas where muck was previously removed.
- **Apple snail eggs were produced at a newly constructed hatchery** at Lemkin Creek in Okeechobee County as part of a joint effort with Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. The eggs were subsequently transplanted to Lake Okeechobee as the preferred food source for the endangered snail kite.
- **Vallisneria, a type of aquatic plant, was installed in cages** along the Caloosahatchee Estuary, to re-establish the tape grass, which is critical to the food web in the sensitive estuary environment.
- **Surveying** was conducted in Lake Okeechobee's littoral zone and marsh to identify locations for future muck removal or tilling.

Lake Okeechobee is at 11.13 feet NGVD, which remains more than 3.5 feet below average for this time of year when wet season rains would typically have filled the lake.

This is the third time in five years that the District has taken advantage of drought conditions in Lake Okeechobee to perform environmental improvements. In 2007 and 2008, extremely low water levels allowed access to remove decayed vegetation and hurricane-stirred organic matter along the shoreline. The work helped to improve water clarity, reduce phosphorus levels and foster new growth of aquatic vegetation when lake levels increased.

For more information on water conditions, go to [www.sfwmd.gov/waterwatch](http://www.sfwmd.gov/waterwatch).

# # #

### **About the South Florida Water Management District**

*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.*