



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

OPINION

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Comprehensive Plan Will Improve Water Quality in America's Everglades

Everglades restoration recently took a significant step forward, as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency concurred with a comprehensive plan – first proposed by Governor Rick Scott last October – that will vastly improve water quality in the famed *River of Grass*.

This far-reaching strategy to address the concerns of two federal courts includes state-issued Clean Water Act permits and a suite of new water storage and treatment projects. It is a watershed moment in the history of Everglades restoration and welcomed news, as reflected in the outpouring of support across the state. For many, one of the strongest aspects of the plan is that it moves us closer to resolving the decades-long litigation associated with Everglades water quality.

As Executive Director of the South Florida Water Management District, the agency that will construct the water quality improvement projects, I want to highlight key features in this scientifically sound and financially feasible plan that will solve long-standing environmental challenges and ensure we achieve the stringent water quality requirements established for the Everglades.

First, our proposal will invest \$880 million to construct state-of-the-art water quality improvement projects without raising taxes. We're going to do this on a realistic schedule, not only because this is cutting-edge work being implemented on a vast scale but also because the District must balance environmental restoration with its other critical missions like providing flood control and ensuring a sustainable supply of water for 7.7 million South Floridians.

Second, the new water quality projects now incorporate for the first time the use of water storage areas to work in tandem with the thousands of acres of existing treatment wetlands, known as stormwater treatment areas. After more than a decade of operating and managing these natural, water quality facilities, we have the science – and the experience – to know that extreme fluctuations in water levels brought on by South Florida's weather extremes often prevent these constructed wetlands from functioning at their best.

By connecting constructed wetlands to these water storage areas (known as flow equalization basins), we will be able to better manage the delivery of water to the treatment facilities even during droughts and storms. Altogether, the District will construct another 6,700 acres of new treatment wetlands and 110,000 acre-feet of water storage south of Lake Okeechobee to ensure that water discharged to the Everglades is cleaner than even rainwater. To provide additional assurance that our water quality goals will be met, we will also implement sub-regional source controls in several key areas where more intensive water quality improvements are needed.

Maximizing taxpayer investments already made in Everglades water quality, we are able to utilize close to 20,000 acres of land already in public ownership. This is not insignificant. Large tracts well-suited for water storage and treatment facilities are readily available for project planning and construction, saving time and taxpayer expense. In addition, we are pursuing mutually beneficial land exchanges with willing partners that will put the finishing touches on plan components in the eastern Everglades. With land in-hand and fewer hurdles to clear, construction can begin in short order – creating jobs and putting major project components on line in just six years.

This practical, science-based approach builds upon Florida's significant progress over the past decade to improve water quality, which was recently recognized by the National Academy of Sciences. With 57,000 acres of treatment wetlands already constructed and cleaning the water flowing into the Everglades, we have treated 3.75 *trillion* gallons of water to-date and removed 1,470 metric tons of phosphorus. Improved farming methods, known as best management practices, have been equally successful, preventing 2,400 tons of phosphorus from reaching the Everglades.

The key for success of this landmark plan is its broad support. Following months of productive negotiations between the state and federal agencies, there also has been consensus building with environmental groups, the agricultural community, elected officials and other key stakeholders. We still have several more steps to take before project construction can begin, including negotiating some regulatory details and, most importantly, our Governing Board's vote on the final regulatory package, making a decision to commit the District financially, operationally and legally to delivering on the plan.

Now, because of Governor Scott's leadership, we are poised to embark on the final leg of Florida's journey to achieving Everglades water quality standards and providing lasting protection to one of the nation's most unique natural places.

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