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SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Getting *our* water *right*

Everglades Restoration plans are underway. Here we look at the most recent Report to Congress on the progress.

▲ **Above: An airboat tour at Everglades National Park.**

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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One of the world's largest and most complex hydrological engineering projects, the restoration of Florida's Everglades — an 18,000-square mile ecosystem stretching from Orlando to the Florida Keys — all comes down to one thing: "getting the water right."

That's shorthand for the 20-year-old Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and related projects. They are crucial to our quality of life in South Florida, planners say, at a time when

SEE **WATER, A12** ▶

■ **INSIDE:** *Data from the most recent Report to Congress.* **A12-14** ▶

Hank Aaron's childhood home 'a place of happy family life'

BY WILLIAM SPENCER
Special to Florida Weekly

SPENCER

In my retirement, I've become an avid reader of Randy Wayne White's novels featuring the adventures of Doc Ford. In the eighth book, "Shark River," Ford visits the vacant home of his late uncle. His entering is described: "Silence has a museum quality in a house vacated by death."

This sentence was stunning to me.

I've experienced that feeling.

In my 27 years as curator of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, I accumulated a vast amount of truly special memories. One in particular was a visit on an extremely hot summer day in 2007 to the boyhood home of Henry Aaron in Mobile, Ala.

Accompanying me was Erik Strohl, one of the staff curators and the person who would replace me upon my retirement in 2009, and Mary Quinn, director of Exhibits and Design at the

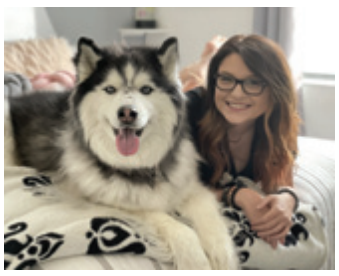
SEE **AARON, A16** ▶

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY
Baseball player Hank Aaron.

INSIDE

It's season
Be it an unusual one, the arts and entertainment industry presses on with new shows. **B1** ▶

Entering 2021
A business and marketing outlook. **A29** ▶



It's a PJ party
Cape Coral shelter to host PJ party for pets who need homes. **A11** ▶

House hunting
4151 Park Shore Blvd. N., Naples. **A32** ▶

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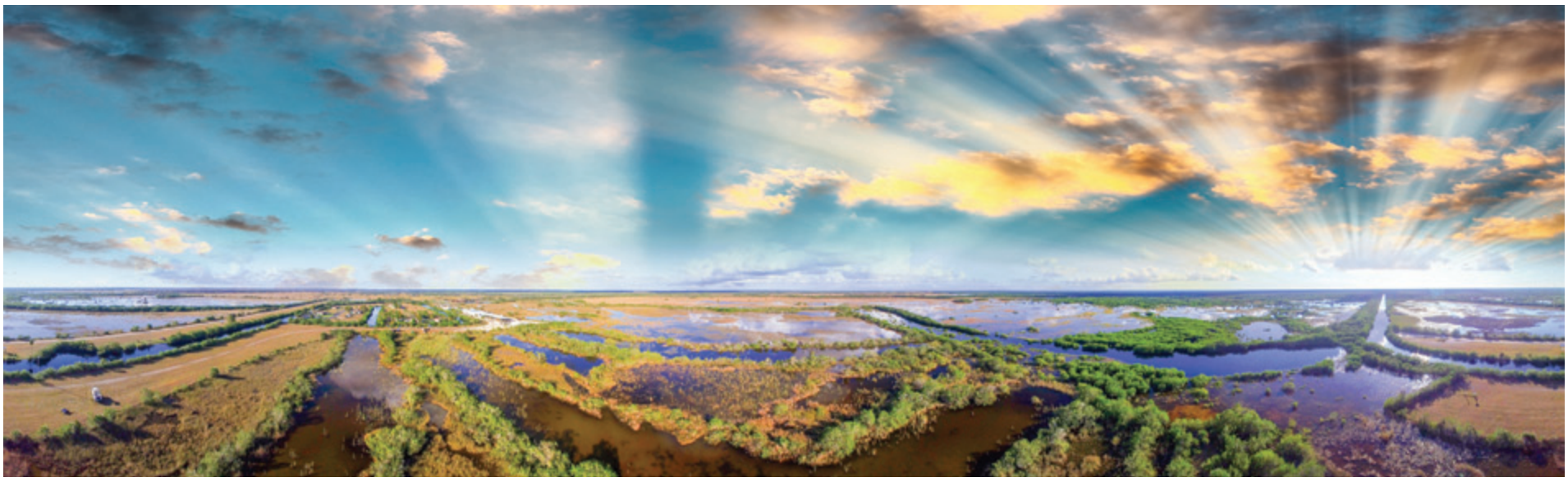
"While there is no question that much progress has been made — with faster response and more support from Congress and the Corps of Engineers we could be further along."

— Dr. Darren Rumbold, director of the Coastal Watershed Institute and professor of Marine Science



SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

A sunset aerial panoramic view of Everglades Park, Florida.

WATER

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the consequences of not getting the water right — due to early engineering of the region's wetlands — has become increasingly problematic.

At stake include the toxic blue-green algal blooms that wreak havoc on coastal industries alongside the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Estuaries and inland on Lake Okeechobee; saltwater intrusion in the enormous Biscayne Aquifer that 5 million people in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties rely on for potable water; flood protection as the effects of sea level rise and rapid population growth converge; and a degraded ecosystem of plant and animal life.

A restored system is designed to create a healthy environment that is resilient to these problems and therefore supports a strong economy as well.

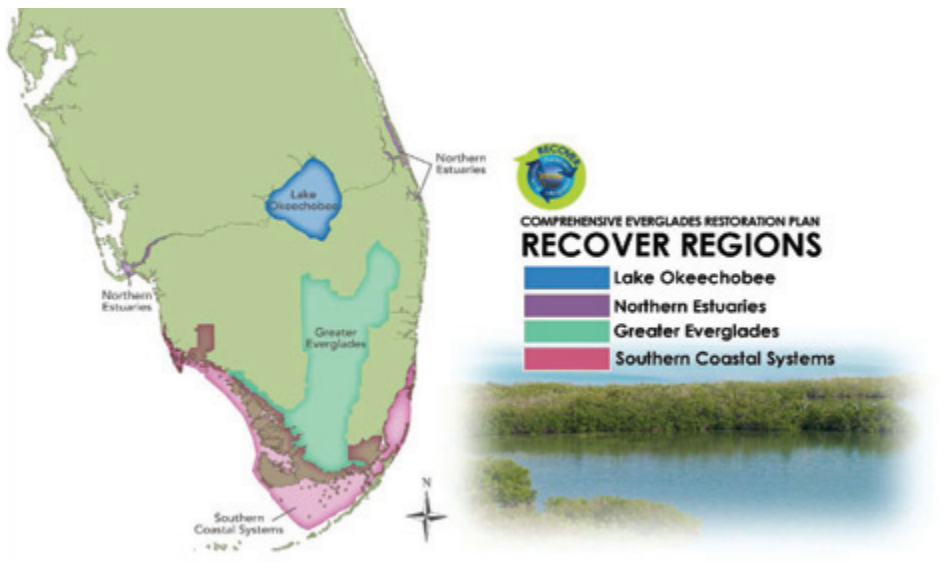
CERP is the largest part of this Everglades restoration plan. Approved by the Water Resources Development Act of 2000, it includes 68 interlocking components, some of them major long-term projects in their own right.

The plan is also reliant on many "non-CERP" but foundational projects that are crucial to the overall success of the restoration. The agencies that plan it aim to clean polluted water while also being able to move it across the land in huge volumes, depending on the time of year.

More or less the whole thing could be complete after 2030, according to the official Integrated Delivery Schedule, a living document that is regularly updated. Some of the major restoration projects are just now, after several decades, beginning to reach completion and produce environmental benefits that suggest our system is resilient, such as wading birds and wildlife returning to the Kissimmee River floodplain or the Picayune Strand.

But getting the federal government — which shares the cost of restoration with Florida — to supply adequate and timely funding has been a challenge in the past and will be crucial to the ongoing project, planners say. Studies show that the more we invest upfront in restoration, the less it will cost in the long run.

"We need consistent funding and bipartisan leadership at the state and federal levels to keep restoration on track," said Marisa Carrozzo, Everglades & Water Policy manager for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida. "We have multi-million dollar restoration projects that are going to be in various stages of planning, construction and implementation, and that's going to be accelerating over the next couple of years. We're seeing the need to significantly invest even more in Everglades restoration to keep it on track. The bottom line is, the longer restoration takes the more expensive it is, and the more we invest now, the less it will cost in the long run."



SOURCE: REPORT TO CONGRESS ON EVERGLADES RESTORATION, 2015 – 2020 MOMENTUM

The RECOVER program, the scientific arm of CERP, serves to assess Everglades restoration progress throughout the South Florida ecosystem.

CARROZZO

The total estimated cost continues to balloon to an estimated $23.2 billion, some $6.8 billion more than the previous estimate five years ago (though more than $2 billion of that increase was due to inflation).

Of the projected $23.2 billion, $3.2 billion has been allocated so far, $1.3 billion of it during the last five fiscal years.

The Report to Congress

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the project's lead builder, and partner agencies are required to report to Congress on the progress of Everglades Restoration every five years, including both CERP and its related non-CERP "Foundation" projects.

Here is a look at the progress of seven of the most important (out of more than 50) projects at the center of restoration plans as they are described in the fourth Report to Congress on Everglades Restoration, covering July 2015 to June 2020 — a glance at where we are headed on this decades-long scientific, socio-economic and political journey to recover historic waterflow.

Scholars at Florida Gulf Coast University with its new Water School, an interdisciplinary facility used to research the region's water quality issues, agree that the Report to Congress is a testament to both crucial advances as well as the need for bipartisan funding support for CERP programs.

"While there is no question that much progress has been made — with faster response and more support from Congress and the Corps of Engineers we could be further along," said Dr. Darren Rumbold, director of the Coastal Watershed Institute and professor of Marine Science.

RUMBOLD

Ecology & Environmental Studies professor and USGA Emeritus, Dr. Barry H. Rosen, said: "Going back to the bigger picture, I think everyone agrees great progress has been made. Should we make more progress, should it be faster? Yes. There's no question."

ROSEN

Over this last five year period, several harmful blue-green algae outbreaks in coastal estuaries that hurt major industries, including tourism, real estate and fishing, put pressure on political leaders to move forward more quickly with the planning and construction of reservoirs and Stormwater Treatment marshes that could help control the problem by reducing the need for discharges from Lake Okeechobee. The Corps must control the amount of water in the Lake because if it gets too full it could be at risk of breaching the aging Herbert Hoover Dike, which is under repair.

While the increased activity to build reservoirs and treatment marshes is a good thing, Dr. Rosen says, he also warns that there is no "silver bullet" to controlling these discharges. But they can, along with other CERP projects, help the Corps reduce them.

"The best that CERP is going to be able to do is cut back on the amount of times that you have to discharge the water east and west, when you have all these reservoirs in place," he said. "But if those reservoirs get too full and they have to discharge and they are building up their own nutrient load from agricultural runoff, you could have a bloom in those reservoirs as well. So there's no silver bullet."

Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir

Everglades restoration requires an enormous amount of water storage capacity in the form of reservoirs, along with Stormwater Treatment Areas or man-made marshes that help clean the water, all around Lake O. But the EAA Reservoir Project is seen by many as the heart of Everglades Restoration.

It has been planned south of Lake O in the Everglades Agricultural Area, 700,000 acres that the federal government in 1948 set aside for agricultural development and now an area controlled mostly by sugar cane farming businesses.

Such reservoir projects are seen as one of the best ways to control harmful algae blooms, among other benefits. After federal and state funding came through, a planned 10,100-acre EAA Reservoir to be complete by 2028 and 6,500-acre Stormwater Treatment Area set to be complete in December 2023 are being built. The $1.8 billion project will be coordinated with the Central Everglades Planning Project, a large suite of CERP developments designed to redirect water flows south.

The Central Planning Project and the EAA Reservoir "provide necessary infrastructure to meet the CERP goals for clean water flow to the central Everglades and further the ongoing restoration of the Southern Everglades and Florida Bay," said assistant secretary of the Army, R.D. James, in the Report to

Congress. "These projects will reduce the releases from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries by capturing, storing, and cleaning and re-directing that water to the Everglades where it is needed."

But not all scientists agree that the plan we are now moving forward with will adequately protect the Everglades and control discharges to the estuaries. The reservoir is not big enough to handle the volumes of water it should and even at this limited capacity, the Stormwater Treatment marsh the state is now building is not big enough clean the water from the reservoir, says a 2018 paper published in the journal Ecological Engineering by Dr. William J. Mitsch, director of Everglades Wetland Research Park and Juliet C. Sproul Chair for Southwest Florida Habitat Restoration and Management at Florida Gulf Coast University.


MITSCH

The reservoir and water treatment system now being built would be able to move on average 121 billion gallons of water per year south. To put that in perspective, Dr. Mitsch points out that 819 billion gallons of water were discharged down the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries in 2016, an El Nino flooding year. Even on average between 2008 and 2017, more than 360 billion gallons per year were discharged down the estuaries.

And the water quality treatment capacity is woefully inadequate for the volumes of water the reservoir holds, Dr. Mitsch argues. The current project calls for a 6,500-acre Stormwater Treatment marsh alongside the reservoir, while Dr. Mitsch estimates that the system needs at least 43,000 acres and an available 100,000 acres would be even better. Otherwise, the water sent south could end up polluting Everglades National Park.

An environmental advocacy group based in Stuart, Friends of the Everglades, supports Dr. Mitsch's conclusions.

"We believe that (the EAA Reservoir and STA project) has been shrunken down too much," said executive director Eve Samples. "We believe it needs to be larger to truly move adequate amounts of water south from Lake Okeechobee and clean it so it can reach the southern Everglades and Florida Bay, and to really bring meaningful relief to the estuaries that have been receiving water (from Lake O) like a relief valve (and have been) treated like a sewer, really, for many decades."

Still, the reservoir and STA remain a key restoration project. The U.S. Army Corps and South Florida Water Management officials call it "essential to the health and ultimate recovery of the Everglades."

"Is it the final increment of what we need south of (Lake O)?" asks Ms. Carrozzo with the Conservancy. "I think we need to build upon what we have right now...

"We certainly support the project going forward with the understanding that we need all the (CERP) projects working together to actually achieve the full benefits. It's an important project for both of the coasts as well as getting water south."

Caloosahatchee River C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir and C-44 Reservoir

Two major reservoirs and water treatment areas to the east and west of Lake O are under construction, expected to be complete this year and in 2024, respectively. They are also expected to help control blue-green algal blooms and balance water salinity to protect plants and wildlife.

"When complete in the next reporting period, these two reservoirs will provide much needed relief to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries," said Dr. Petty, assistant secretary for the Army of Water and Science, in a letter accompanying the Report to Congress.

The C-44 Reservoir and STA with 50,600 acre-feet of water storage, expected to be complete this year, is designed to reduce pollution and improve salinity in the St. Lucie Estuary and the southern portion of the Indian River Lagoon.

Construction of the C-43 Reservoir will store approximately 170,000 acre-feet of water. It is designed to help reduce the volume of discharges from Lake O to the Caloosahatchee Estuary during the wet season and provide a source of freshwater flow to the estuary during the dry season to help balance salinity levels. Construction began on the dam embankment and other structures a few years ago and it is expected to be complete in 2024.

Picayune Strand Restoration Project

After more than two decades, the first CERP project is finally about 80% complete, which will restore a natural way in to the 10,000 Islands National Wildlife Refuge area. The project reestablishes natural water flow across 85 square miles drained in the early 1960s for a failed development connected to Golden Gate and restores more than 55,000 acres of natural habitat in the Picayune Strand in Collier County and adjacent public lands. The improved water flow also reduces large salinity fluctuations in coastal estuaries. Native species have begun to return to the area such as the threatened wood stork and endangered Florida panther.

Herbert Hoover Dike Repair

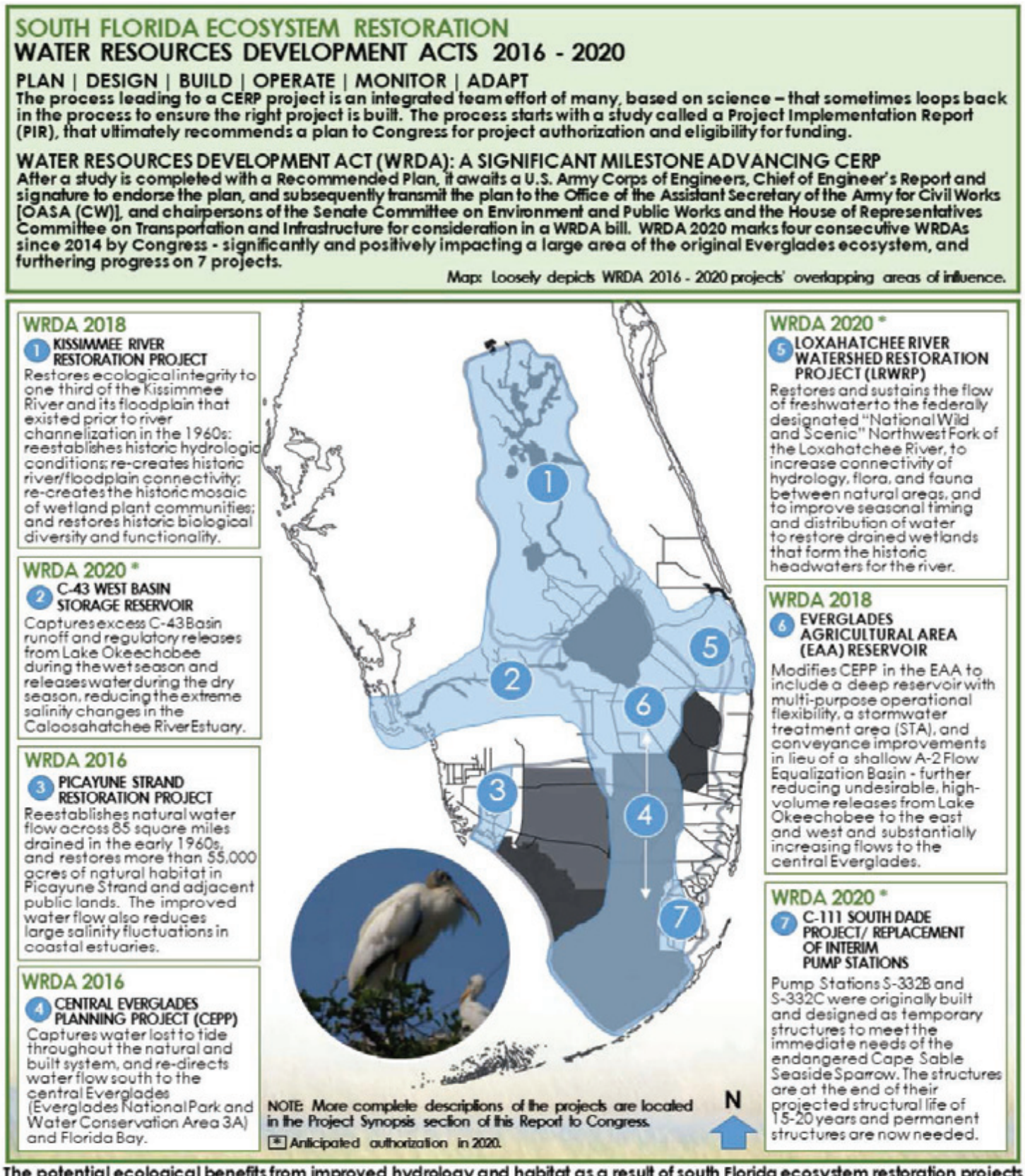
A rehabilitation of the aging 143-mile long Herbert Hoover Dike, which rings Lake O, is scheduled to be complete by 2022, the Report to Congress says. It is considered one of the non-CERP but Foundational Everglades Restoration projects that CERP depends upon.

The dike as it stands now was completed in the 1960s. It has protected towns that sit in its shadow for many years but eventually started to break down and put them at risk. They are in danger when the water level in Lake O gets too full or is pressed by a hurricane's storm surge. When there is too much water in the lake, the Corps can discharge water down the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers, which has caused toxic algal blooms in coastal estuaries but keeps residents in central Florida towns such as Clewiston and Belle Glade safe from a possible breach. During the last several years, USACE said it has already fixed many of the culverts that pose the greatest risk to a breach.

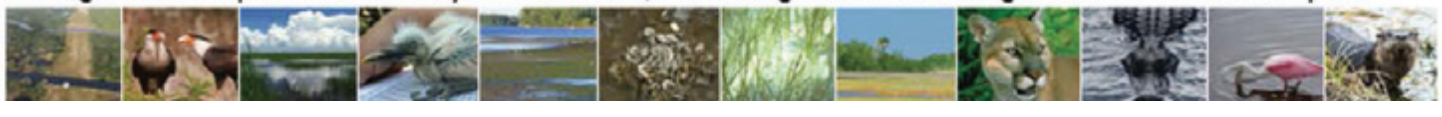
Modified Water Deliveries

This non-CERP but foundational project called Mod Waters is complete. It will help support wading bird populations and fish and wildlife resources, and restore natural ridge and slough formations, officials say, by improv-

SEE WATER, A14 ▶



The potential ecological benefits from improved hydrology and habitat as a result of south Florida ecosystem restoration projects are great, and many benefits are already seen for near completed projects, such as the return of the threatened wood stork and endangered Florida panther to the Picayune Strand area, and wading bird colonies along the Kissimmee River floodplain.



SOURCE: REPORT TO CONGRESS ON EVERGLADES RESTORATION, 2015 – 2020 MOMENTUM

Over the last five years, progress has been made on these Everglades restoration projects taking place throughout the 18,000-square mile ecosystem, stretching from the Kissimmee River region near Orlando south to the Florida Keys.

WATER

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ing natural water flow to Shark River Slough and Everglades National Park. The project consists of flood mitigation, conveyance and seepage control, and construction of a 1-mile bridge under Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) to allow freshwater to flow south.

Tamiami Trail Next Steps Project

A 2.6 mile bridge that allows water to flow under Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) was completed in 2019. Now another 6.5 miles of raised roadway that includes six small bridges is under contract to be complete in 2025.

Kissimmee River Restoration Project

In the northern part of the Everglades system, The Kissimmee River was channelized in the 1960s. This project establishes historic floodplain to create a mosaic of wetland plant communities, biological function and diversity by restoring the meanders or oxbows to one-third of the river. The meanders (as opposed to a straight channel) allow more freshwater to be held within the river's flood plain, benefiting historic habitat and inflow to Lake O. The improvements are starting to perpetuate positive ecological responses, including fewer organic deposits on the river bottom and sandbars that create habitat for birds and invertebrates. A resulting six-fold increase in dissolved oxygen is crucial for aquatic organisms, Everglades Restoration scientists say; and desired recreational fish, largemouth bass and sunfish, make up 63% of the fish community compared to 38% before restoration began. After more than 20 years of construction, the Report to Congress says, this non-CERP Foundation project is nearing completion.

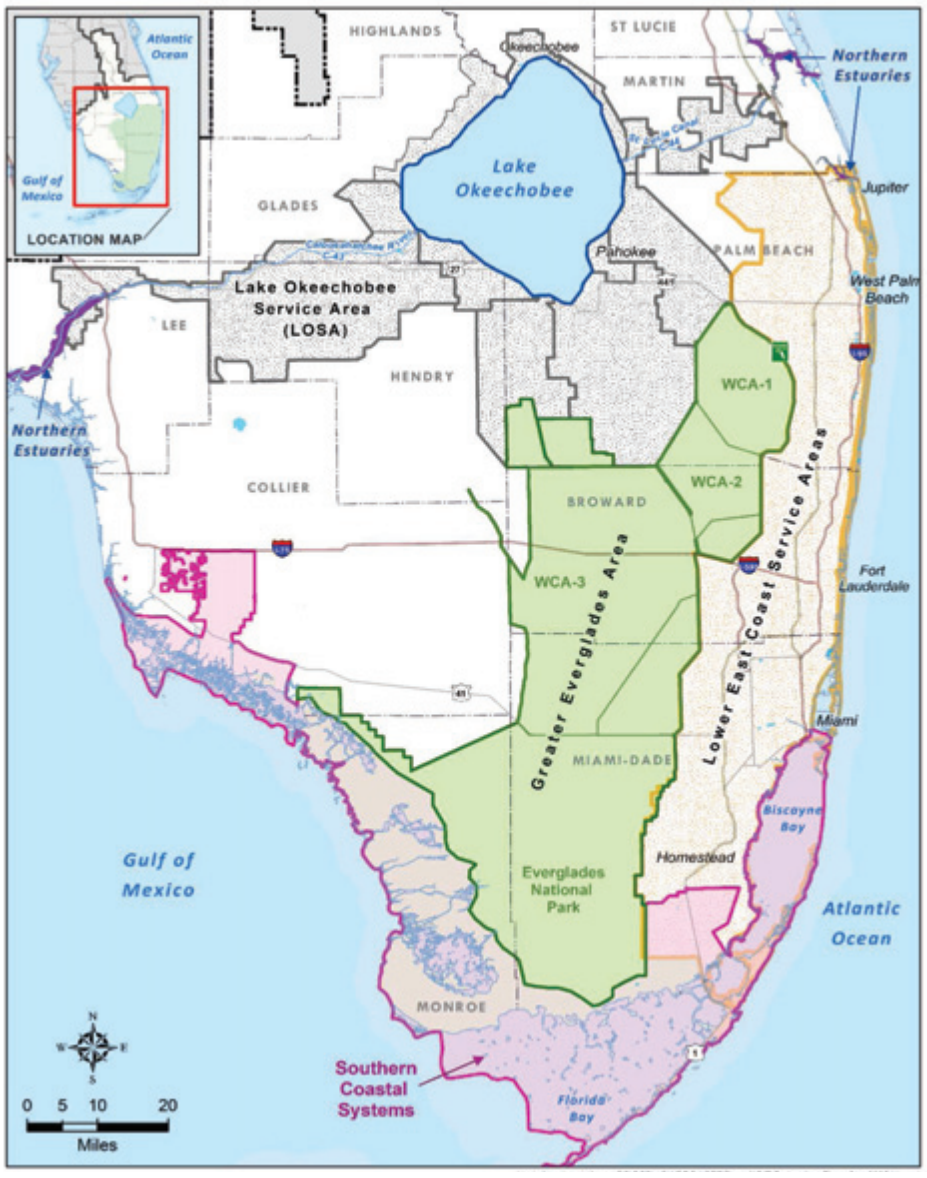
Read the full report

The United States is implementing the restoration of America's Everglades in partnership with the State of Florida, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, local governments and a diverse set of stakeholders, the Corps said in a press release.

The Secretaries of the Army and the Interior jointly submitted the 5-year report to Congress in coordination with the tribes, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Commerce, and the state of Florida.

"The CERP and associated restoration projects are making substantial headway in restoring the quantity, quality, timing, and distribution of fresh water that in turn supports the restoration and recovery of native habitats and species within the 18,000-square mile South Florida Ecosystem," said Dr. Timothy R. Petty, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Water and Science, in a letter accompanying the report.

The full report to Congress on the progress of the restoration of America's Everglades is now available to the public on the Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District website at: www.saj.usace.army.mil/CERP-Report-to-Congress/ ■



SOURCE: REPORT TO CONGRESS ON EVERGLADES RESTORATION, 2015 – 2020 MOMENTUM

This map shows a part of the South Florida ecosystem where federal and state agencies are working to restore the characteristics and paths of historic waterflow.