

## Glades restoration project bungled

Failure to control a key project put it 8 years behind schedule, caused costs to soar 5 times higher than original estimates - and created a domino effect of disastrous environmental consequences

By Jeremy Cox

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The Interior Department has bungled a crucial project that would unplug the clog that inhibits water from flowing into Everglades National Park, the department's inspector general said in a highly critical report released Wednesday.

The department's failure to rein in the project has caused it to fall eight years behind schedule, triggered an avalanche of lawsuits and allowed costs to soar five times above the original estimate, according to the report.

Initially approved by Congress in 1989, the Modified Water Deliveries Project is a forerunner of the \$11 billion Everglades restoration project. While the construction projects associated with Modified Waters are concentrated in western Miami-Dade County, their benefits will reach north to Lake Okeechobee and south to Florida Bay.

The delay in completing Modified Waters has generated a domino effect of disastrous environmental consequences, activists say.

For years, water has backed up to the north of the dam formed by Tamiami Trail and a canal system designed to drain South Florida. As a result, Everglades National Park's marshes are drying out on the south side, and the tree islands in the water conservation area are drowning in water on the north side.

With that water conservation area, which serves as a giant reservoir for South Florida, at its capacity, Lake Okeechobee's swollen waters can only head east and west. The massive freshwater discharges down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers upset the fragile ecological balance of their estuaries.

"As that time is wasted, the Everglades continues to die," said Miccosukee Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion.

The high water in Water Conservation Area 3 is killing 246 acres of tree islands each year, according to the report. Restoring the lost trees - if that is even possible - would cost somewhere between \$12.3 million and \$123 million.

In its original form, Modified Waters was "just supposed to be a few million dollars and a few months," said Barbara Jean Powell of the Everglades Coordinating Council, a sportsmen's group. "The entire resource has collapsed because of the failure."

The ailing Modified Waters is a bad omen for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, a collection of 68 projects that Congress approved in 2000. Like its elder cousin, CERP has faced prolonged legal battles, bureaucratic bickering and missed deadlines.

"If we can't do (Modified) Waters in a reasonable time frame at a reasonable cost, I don't think the feds can pull off CERP. Personally, I'm at the point where I wish the state of Florida would do it on its own," Powell said.

If Interior's leadership doesn't improve its performance, the department can expect even higher costs, more lawsuits, delays in other Everglades projects and further erosion in public support, Interior Inspector General Earl Devaney wrote.

Devaney's report focuses on his own agency's shortfalls and doesn't discuss those of the Army Corps of Engineers, which is heading the project. The report accuses the Interior Department of not developing a "comprehensive and unified" restoration plan - a failure that "has contributed" to escalating costs and delays.

The latest timetable calls for Modified Waters to be constructed by 2009.

In 1989, the project carried an estimated price tag of \$81 million. Expensive design revisions, ballooning real estate prices and rising construction costs have pumped that figure up to \$398 million.

"We're really looking at cost containment," said Dan Kimball, superintendent of Everglades National Park.

The project includes building two-mile and one-mile bridges along Tamiami Trail west of Miami-Dade's urban boundary to allow water to flow underneath. To stave off hazardous flooding, engineers plan to raise nearly eight miles of the roadbed by about two feet.

The proposal is a far cry from what Kimball calls the "environmentally preferred alternative," which would have created a nearly 11-mile "skyway." It also would have boosted the project's cost by \$180 million.

Another project component, dubbed the 8.5 Square Mile Area, also has been plagued by poor planning, the Inspector General report concludes.

The Army Corps initially designed a protective levee and canal to be constructed along the west side of the area, a largely Hispanic neighborhood that lies on the border of Everglades National Park. Fears that the project would over drain the Everglades to bolster South Florida's water supply held up the project for eight years.

In 1998, the state of Florida and Army Corps began preparations to buy out the residents, sparking a long legal battle. What emerged was a plan that mirrors the original idea. Now, the government is only buying up the western one-third of the area and constructing the levee farther eastward.

The Interior Department controlled the funding flowing into Modified Waters until 2006 but didn't require the Army Corps to formally report on progress and costs until 2004, the Inspector General noted.

The Inspector General's leading recommendation is to appoint an official to present a united voice on behalf of the Interior Department to resolve interagency conflicts. The department has responded by tapping Assistant Deputy Secretary Kameran Onley as the lead official and vowing to place a project manager in the Army Corps' Jacksonville office.

"We agree that over the past decade agency coordination and external communications have not always met public expectations," Lynn Scarlett, deputy secretary at the Interior Department, wrote in response to the Inspector General's report.

The delays are due, at least in part, to the dispute over the 8.5 Square Mile Area and the required redesign of the Tamiami Trail bridge, Scarlett added.

"It's a very complicated project," said Kimball, whose agency, the National Park Service, is part of the Interior Department. He added that the project includes several "variables beyond our control."