

Southwest Florida feasibility study finally on track

Bonita Daily News

By Jeremy Cox

Sunday, July 23, 2006

The long-awaited Southwest Florida Feasibility Study is charging forward after years of languishing in a bureaucratic backlog.

And the \$12 million effort has battled back federal calls to incorporate projects that would reduce flooding problems and boost water supplies for urban and agricultural consumers.

In February, officials with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Washington, D.C., urged the project's local managers to revise the study's focus.

Instead of environmental restoration, they wanted more emphasis on drainage and water supply issues, said Janet Starnes, who is leading the study for the South Florida Water Management District.

Over the next month, the project's "middle managers" as Starnes referred to herself and Debbie Peterson, the Army Corps' planning technical lead in Jacksonville discussed the proposition. Their conclusion?

"(Restoration) is our first and foremost priority," Starnes said.

Officials and scientists won't actively pursue water supply or water-control projects. But if a high-ranking project happens to have such a component and it doesn't compromise restoration goals, that are OK, Starnes added.

The feasibility study is a small slice of the 30-year, \$10.8 billion Everglades restoration project. The larger effort has been criticized for diverting money and energy toward reservoirs and wells that will retain water for farmers and South Florida's booming population.

A former state biologist questioned high-level officials' motives Friday during a public meeting.

"The folks who have not been to Florida are raising a red flag of water control and water supply. The folks who want to use this (study) to allow new development are showing up," Jim Beaver told the Southwest Florida Regional Restoration Coordination Team, a federal advisory group.

The study needs to remain a blueprint for turning back decades of environmental destruction, said Beaver, now with the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council.

In recent months, feasibility study work has churned out a list of 115 potential restoration projects. The study's confines are a 4,300-square-mile area that includes all of Lee, most of Collier and Hendry, and parts of Charlotte, Glades and Monroe counties.

But until about a year ago, the study appeared to be losing traction. As a result, its completion was pushed back from March 2005 to October 2008.

In a report last year to Congress, the Army Corps acknowledged that the feasibility study was delayed "due to difficulties in obtaining and reconciling necessary data for the Southwest Florida region and in developing and calibrating new hydrologic models."

Translation: Officials lacked critical information about how water flows across Southwest Florida's landscape. Without that, they couldn't begin to make good decisions, Starnes said.

A revolving door at the Army Corps' project manager's office slowed the project, team members have said. And competing restoration priorities, such as the Southern Golden Gate Estates restoration and the Caloosahatchee River reservoir, drew several team members' attention away from the feasibility study.

"Everything was fast-tracked," said Joyce Mazourek, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist based on Sanibel Island.

Everything, that is, except the Southwest Florida Feasibility Study.

Said Starnes: "This (feasibility study) kicked off at the same time as CERP (the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan) kicked off. CERP was a whole new way of working for the federal government.

"It really took two or three years for the people working together on CERP to figure out how to work on the same level. I think the feasibility study got lost in the shuffle."

All that changed when Peterson took the helm, Starnes said. Immediately, she began calling meetings, often reminding others to attend and leading the discussions.

"It's like all of a sudden the train finally had an engineer," Starnes said. "Debbie knows the process. She's just not easily overwhelmed. She's a problem-solver. She's just made a huge difference, and I don't think anyone would disagree with that."

Messages were left Friday for Peterson at her office and on her cell phone but she was unavailable for comment.

Now, with their list of 115 projects, team members are evaluating the list one watershed at a time. Officials are inviting the public at 9 a.m. Thursday to air concerns about the study at the South Florida Water Management District's office on McGregor Boulevard in Fort Myers.

For her part, Starnes doubts the Army Corps possesses ulterior motives when it suggests that projects save some water for drinking or fix drainage woes.

"Traditionally, those are the kinds of projects they've done. This whole ecological, environmental thing is new to them. They were just afraid we were leaving benefits on the table we could add to the project," Starnes said.

"But we were concerned about changing the focus of the project," she added. SENT

What's feasible?

The Everglades restoration project is coming to Southwest Florida. Scientists, water managers and local leaders have developed a preliminary list of 115 projects and are working to narrow it down. Here are some of the key proposals:

1. Gordon River restoration

-- Acreage: 578

-- Location: Along Gordon River, Rock Creek, Goodlette-Frank Road ditches

-- Problem: Spoil berms blocking water exchange with mangroves, habitat loss, high stormwater flows

-- Fix: Remove berms, construct filter marshes

2. Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed area

-- Acreage: 77,870

-- Location: Southeastern Lee, north-central Collier counties, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

-- Problem: Levees, roads, ditches and trams interrupt water flows; habitat loss

-- Fix: Create openings in barriers, dig reservoirs or construct aquifer-storage recovery wells to hold excess water, restore habitat to predevelopment condition

3. Camp Keais restoration

-- Acreage: 16,404

-- Location: Southwest of Immokalee, near future town and university of Ave Maria

-- Problem: Habitat loss, disrupted flowways in farming areas

-- Fix: Restore flowways, return land to predevelopment shape

4. Okaloacoochee Slough hydrologic restoration

-- Acreage: 135,295

-- Location: Northeastern Collier County, southwest Hendry County

-- Problem: Habitat loss, drainage ditches interrupt flow, County Roads 858 and 846 block flows, Florida panthers getting hit by cars in Dinner Island Ranch vicinity

-- Fix: Restore land to predevelopment, fill in ditches and canals, install wildlife crossings

5. Agripartners restoration

-- Acreage: 3,840

-- Location: North of Citrus Park community in northeastern Bonita Springs

-- Problem: Exotic plants, borrow pit, road without culverts, habitat loss

-- Fix: Plant water plants along shore of borrow pit, remove exotics, restore to predevelopment, put culverts under road

6. Babcock Ranch

-- Acreage: 91,695 (assumes no development taking place)

-- Location: Southeastern Charlotte, northeast Lee counties

-- Problem: Habitat loss, water collecting on site

-- Fix: Restore land to predevelopment shape, manage water levels

7. Tidal Caloosahatchee creeks restoration

-- Acreage: 9,161

-- Location: Along Caloosahatchee River, Owl Creek, Telegraph Creek, Otter Creek, Spanish Creek, Lower Powell Creek, Popash Creek

-- Problem: Water flows diverted or blocked, channelized drainage, poor stormwater quality, eroding creek banks

-- Fix: Construct filter marshes, install weirs, create openings for water to flow under roads and through berms, stabilize banks with vegetation

8. Caloosahatchee oxbow restoration

-- Acreage: 764

-- Location: Along ancient Caloosahatchee riverbed

-- Problem: Loss of shoreline

-- Fix: Restore natural shoreline

9. Estero/Bonita Springs headwaters and flowways

-- Acreage: 25,005

-- Location: Halfway Creek, Estero River, Mullock Creek, Estero Bay Buffer Preserve in Estero; Spring Creek, Benson Property, Bonita Springs Utilities property east of Interstate 75, Leitner Creek, Imperial River in Bonita Springs

-- Problem: Inadequate flows to Estero River and Halfway Creek, Leitner channelization, Imperial River flowway water quality problems, vehicle trails in Estero Bay buffer, ditches drain into Spring Creek

-- Fix: Construct and replace water connections across I-75 and U.S. 41 for Estero River, restore BSU property to predevelopment, fix Imperial stormwater issues, filter marsh in pasture at headwaters of Leitner Creek, remove trails in Estero buffer preserve, place water control structures on ditches leading to Spring Creek

10. Loop Road improvements

-- Acreage: N/A

-- Location: Along unpaved Loop Road from Monroe Station on U.S. 41 East to Pinecrest community in mainland Monroe County

-- Problem: Road and canal impede water flow through Big Cypress National Preserve

-- Fix: Fill in half of the canal and add culverts beneath road