

# Everglades activists to urge Senate majority leader to bring bill to vote

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By Jeremy Cox

Nearly \$1.6 billion for restoring the Everglades is languishing in Congress, and activists plan to remind U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of that in a big way today.

Organizers of the nationwide campaign hope to swamp the Tennessee Republican's office with phone calls and e-mails, urging him to bring the Water Resources Development Act to a vote.

"We're hoping he'll understand the degree of support out around America," said Worth Hager, president of the National Waterways Alliance, which set up the campaign.

The bill would pay for water works projects nationwide, including the \$363 million Southern Golden Gate Estates restoration project in eastern Collier County. That effort aims to fill in canals and remove roads once intended to be the foundation for the world's largest subdivision.

Congress hasn't authorized any of the 68 Everglades restoration projects to move forward since 2000, when the nearly \$11 billion plan was created. The House passed a version of the bill earlier this year, but the Senate has yet to take action, even though 81 senators have signed letters asking for the matter to be discussed.

The bill's passage won't affect the Southern Golden Gate Estates project's timing because the state has put up \$1.5 billion for it and seven other Everglades projects. Restoring the River of Grass, though, was supposed to be collaboration between the state and federal governments.

"We've been very supportive of moving the Water Resources Development Act through Congress, so anything that facilitates the passage of WRDA is a good thing," said Ernie Barnett, director of policy and legislation with the South Florida Water Management District.

If the bill passes, the state would receive credit that could go toward other projects that involve the federal government, including future Everglades projects, Barnett added.

The bill also would pay for the \$1.2 billion Indian River Lagoon restoration project, a component of the Everglades cleanup on Florida's east coast. Martin County officials have been calling on residents to take part in the campaign.

Congress usually passes a water resources development act every two years. But recently, the authorization has faced stiff competition for federal dollars from the Iraq war, the response to Hurricane Katrina and other matters.

Audubon of Florida called on its members to contact Frist as well as the state's U.S. senators, Mel Martinez and Bill Nelson.

"There are a lot of distractions these days in Washington for funding," said Brad Cornell, Big Cypress policy advocate for Audubon of Florida and the Collier County Audubon Society. "But Everglades restoration was defined as a national priority. Some people need to remember it hasn't gone away."