

Everglades restoration: SW Fla. Feasibility Study slows to crawl

Environmental preservationists decry setback at a crucial time in efforts to restore natural water flows and save what is left of the region's dwindling wilderness

By Jeremy Cox

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has run out of money for assessing Southwest Florida's environmental needs, a setback for preservationists hoping to save what's left of the fast-growing region's wilderness.

More than six years into the Southwest Florida Feasibility Study, part of the Everglades restoration campaign, work has slowed to a crawl — again.

In 2000, the Corps and the South Florida Water Management District agreed to split the cost of the then-\$7.8 billion Everglades project. That cost included the modest-by-comparison \$12 million for the Southwest Florida study.

The Corps reached the \$6 million mark in October and promptly halted its staff from attending project meetings with the water management district and other agencies involved in the effort.

“We're basically in maintenance mode, doing the minimum necessary to keep things rolling at this point,” said Dennis Duke, head of the Everglades restoration program for the Corps' Jacksonville district.

The move left water management district officials in the dark about what their counterparts at the Corps were doing. Corps scientists, at the time, were developing computer models that will be used to screen project ideas and select the ones that do the most to restore natural water flows.

Without those models, water management district officials are stuck in a holding pattern, said Janet Starnes, a project manager for the West Palm Beach-based district. In the meantime, they are doing as much as they can without access to the computer programs.

“The water management district hasn't slowed down,” Starnes said.

Another issue is the revolving door that apparently leads to the Corps' project manager office. Since last summer, the agency has reassigned two project managers working on

the feasibility study. Starnes said she doesn't know whom to contact at the Corps about the project.

"You could put in there that I suggested to call Cheryl because I can't tell you who else to call," Starnes said, referring to Cheryl Ulrich, chief of the Corps' restoration program's execution branch.

Duke said the project manager slot for the Southwest Florida study is open and waiting to be filled.

The feasibility study's problems are widely seen as a bad omen for the wider Everglades restoration campaign, which has sputtered from a lack of promised federal dollars.

"Things are looking dimmer for Everglades restoration," said Nancy Payton, Florida Wildlife Federation's Southwest Florida field representative. "This is another example of the waning federal interest."

Congress hasn't given a single Everglades project the go-ahead since 2000, when the campaign kicked off. A Water Resources Development Act, which contained \$1.5 billion for the Southern Golden Gate Estates restoration and another key project, died in the closing days of last December's session.

The feasibility study was the Everglades plan's nod toward Southwest Florida's environmental issues. The booming region was largely left out of the plan because the area lacked the volumes of data on groundwater and surface water flows that scientists had for South Florida, Corps officials have said.

The study is targeting 4,300 square miles of land, including all of Lee, most of Collier and Hendry, and portions of Charlotte, Glades and Monroe counties. Restoring the Gordon River, fixing Estero Bay's broken tributaries and reviving Camp Keais in eastern Collier County are among the more than 60 projects under consideration.

The feasibility study began with a rash of meetings in 2002, then faded from the public spotlight before re-emerging last year. According to initial estimates, the study was to have been submitted to Congress in March 2005; now, the goal is October 2008.

Duke said the funding shortfall might cause that date to be pushed back by a few weeks or months, assuming the money is restored soon. An unexpected need to gather more data and a greater emphasis on the damaging flows into Pine Island Sound raised the cost of the study to \$15 million.

The Corps and water management district must agree to the new figure before the two sides can move forward, Duke said. He expects the district's governing board to take up the matter this month.

Time is of the essence, said Jim Beever of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council.

“We’re looking at people proposing to do developments in some of the areas that the feasibility study is looking at restoring,” Beever said. “The rate of change is exceeding the pace of planning.”

Payton agreed.

“By the time the study is done, the whole topography of Southwest Florida will be different. They’ll have to do a restudy.”