

WRDA water bill is ‘dead’

House, Senate unable to resolve differences and pass \$1.56 billion in funding for Everglades restoration

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WASHINGTON — So close, yet so far.

The massive water bill that would have poured billions of dollars into the area for Everglades restoration funding is “officially dead,” U.S. Senate leaders confirmed Wednesday.

The Water Resources Development Act, a bipartisan measure that contained \$1.2 billion for the Indian River Lagoon and more than \$360 million for the Picayune Strand restoration project, passed through both chambers of Congress in July but was held up in a conference committee where House and Senate members attempted to iron out their differences.

But those differences were far-reaching and lawmakers couldn’t come to a consensus as the clock on the current congressional session ran down.

“As of 1:47 p.m. (Tuesday when talks ended), WRDA is dead,” said Matt Dempsey, a spokesman for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. “We have a limited amount of time in this session and there was too big of a divide.”

Dempsey wouldn’t comment on the specific differences between House and Senate conferees but said the committee will continue to push for the long-overdue measure during the next Congress, which begins in January.

“It did pass the House. It did pass the Senate,” Dempsey said. “We were just shy of the finish line. So, to start over again ... it’s disappointing.”

Along the Treasure Coast, the restoration project would focus on aquatic habitat in the St. Lucie Estuary and the southern portion of the Indian River Lagoon, removing deposits of muck and phosphorous in lakes and canals that have polluted the lagoon’s sea grasses and oyster flats.

In Southwest Florida, the bill would have allowed the federal government to join the state in restoring Southern Golden Gate Estates, a failed subdivision in eastern Collier County. In 2004, Gov. Jeb Bush announced a then-\$1.5 billion plan to accelerate eight projects in the Everglades campaign, a list that included the \$362 million job in the Collier subdivision.

Since then, the South Florida Water Management District has begun filling in canals and tearing out miles of dead-end roads in an effort to restore sheet flow to the 55,000-acre swath. Returning water to its shallow, slow path will help return and improve the health of the Ten Thousands Islands estuary, experts say.

The federal money also would have allowed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct new waterway projects and make modifications to existing structures that are in need of renovation. Supporters of the bill said they were disappointed by the news Wednesday, but said they will continue to fight their six-year battle.

“Another two years wasted,” said April Gromnicki, a lobbyist for Audubon, the environmental group. “It’s extremely disappointing and I fear that it is a failure on the part of the federal government to uphold its end of the bargain.”

Over the past two years, Gromnicki and local activists frequently visited with members of Congress and urged them to pass the bill before the current session ends.

“It demonstrates an utter lack of leadership,” Gromnicki said. “We did not see the Bush administration weigh in to make sure this happens. You see them talk about how supportive they are of Everglades Restoration, but where were they? What did they do this year? Nothing got accomplished.”

This isn’t the first time lawmakers have been unable to meet in the middle. In 2003, the bill suffered a similar fate and died in a conference committee after lawmakers couldn’t sort out their differences.

Congress hasn’t passed a water bill since 2000.

“It’s been up and down many times,” said Karl Wickstrom, publisher of the Florida Sportsman magazine and chairman of the Rivers Coalition Legal Task Force. “We’re getting used to it. It seems there’s always something else that takes priority, which is too bad. It’s a badly needed project. We have to keep fighting for it.

“The long struggle will continue,” Wickstrom added.