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Chairman's Message

Daniel O'Keefe, Governing Board Chairman



Earlier this month, the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection released the *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* (SFER), a comprehensive update on South Florida's water resources and ecosystems. The report captures front-and-center issues the Board addressed throughout the year, from ecological conditions in our 16 counties to construction progress on Everglades restoration projects. The 3,000-page full report includes input from more than 100 authors and contributors, with highlights covered in a 27-page Executive Summary viewable at www.sfwmd.gov/sfer.

In addition to our scientists' work on the SFER, close to 75 District staff were published in peer-reviewed journals this past year. Their work is a testament to the District's expertise as well as to the value of our water resource data and analyses to the scientific community.

The Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP), a component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, continues on its path forward. The Board was briefed on the District's financial capability for CEPP and next will be considering a Letter of Support and Statement of Financial Capability.

Taking place not far from District headquarters is preliminary work to repair two small dams that hydrate portions of the federally designated Wild and Scenic Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River. The Masten and Lainhart dams help hold water at levels that benefit the diverse ecology of the river's ecosystem. Planned work on the dam includes plugging holes to reduce seepage and also improving safety for recreation access.

Looking ahead, April 1 marks the annual start of Water Conservation Month. Each year, the State of Florida and dozens of local governments join the District in promoting water conservation efforts during the month. Our year-round landscape irrigation rule, dedicated website at www.savewaterfl.com and community outreach activities all help to increase public awareness on this important water resource topic.

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Annual Environmental Report Highlights Restoration Progress, State of the South Florida Ecosystem

Water quality improvements are among the 2014 highlights



The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) have released the *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* detailing a year of science, engineering and environmental restoration progress to improve the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee, the Kissimmee Basin and South Florida coastal areas. The 2014 report marks the 16th year of unified, streamlined environmental reporting by the two agencies.

"With the support of Governor Rick Scott and his landmark \$880 million Everglades water quality plan, we have accelerated projects designed to improve water quality and flow to the River of Grass," said DEP Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr. "That commitment continues in 2014, with Governor Scott's \$130 million recommendation to further Everglades restoration."

Spanning three volumes, the *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* unifies more than 75 individual documents. The volumes, plus a 27-page executive summary, provide extensive

peer-reviewed research summaries, data analyses, financial updates and a searchable database of environmental projects.

"We continued to make progress during the last year to construct projects that improve Everglades water quality and increase water storage while also managing record rainfall," said SFWMD Executive Director Blake Guillory. "The *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* documents these efforts and our plans to move forward with the state's Restoration Strategies initiative to benefit the entire South Florida environment."

Highlights in the 2014 report include:

- **Expanded network of Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) is cleansing water.** With 57,000 acres of treatment wetlands operating, South Florida's network of STAs treated 1.2 million acre-feet of water, achieving their best performance to date. Working together with best management and improved farming practices over nearly two decades, the treatment marshes have prevented approximately 4,270 metric tons of phosphorus from entering the Everglades.
- **Restoration Strategies are being implemented.** Work is underway on several key construction projects in the State of Florida and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's milestone agreement to achieve state water quality standards for the Everglades. This includes construction progress on two shallow reservoirs, known as flow equalization basins, that will help optimize the performance of the STAs and moving forward with science plan studies.
- **Best Management Practices (BMPs) continue reducing nutrients.** Working in conjunction with the STAs, the Everglades Agricultural Area delivered a 41-percent reduction this year when compared to the pre-BMP baseline time period. To the west, the C-139 Basin reduced phosphorus discharges to historic levels.
- **Projects and initiatives are improving South Florida's ecosystems.** A host of restoration work was completed or moved forward in the past year, including a three-year update to the Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan and the start of DEP's development of the Lake Okeechobee Basin Management Action Plan to help meet target phosphorus levels. Wading bird nesting on the lake was at its highest since 2006, while white ibis, great egrets and federally endangered wood storks led a moderate improvement in overall nesting throughout South Florida. Progress was also made on a suite of watershed construction projects to benefit the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries.
- **Kissimmee River restoration continues to see success.** The first three phases of Kissimmee River restoration have re-established flow to 24 miles of river channel and returned flow to more than 7,700 acres of floodplain.

These highlights and numerous other efforts featured in the *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* continue to provide the scientific foundation of agency programs and projects that year after year are improving the entire South Florida region. The 2014 report covers environmental information for Water Year 2013 (May 1, 2012, through April 30, 2013) and project/budgetary information for Fiscal Year 2013 (October 1, 2012, through September 30, 2013).

The *2014 South Florida Environmental Report* is available to view or print at www.sfwmd.gov/sfer.

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SFWMD Begins Next Steps of Land Assessment Process

Public meetings will be held to discuss properties under consideration for possible surplus or exchange



As part of an ongoing effort to maximize resources toward its mission-critical responsibilities and continue its commitment to transparency, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is moving forward with the next phase of its comprehensive land assessment.

The District will be considering public lands for exchange or surplus that were identified in 2013 during the first phase of the land assessment. As each property becomes available for proposed action, a public meeting will be held and detailed information will be posted in a database that will be available soon on [the District's website](#). Following the public process, the SFWMD Governing Board will vote on a final recommendation.

The first public meeting was held on March 28 at SFWMD Headquarters in West Palm Beach. One parcel was discussed: a vacant 20.41-acre site in St. Cloud that was originally acquired by the District for construction of a field station.

Taking into account extensive public input as well as feedback from SFWMD subject matter experts, the District determined during the first phase of the assessment that the properties now under review for possible exchange or surplus do not directly support the agency's core mission. Since September, agency staff has been following guidelines from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to further evaluate swapping these properties for more needed lands or potentially selling them.

Land Assessment Process

Launched in January 2013, the District's comprehensive land assessment was designed to ensure that each SFWMD-owned property is being put to its most effective use.

The first phase of the land assessment was a review of the District's nearly 750,000 acres of fee-owned lands — properties in which the agency has full or shared ownership rights. More than 97 percent of the acreage evaluated across five geographic regions was determined to directly support the District's core mission of balancing and improving flood control, water quality, natural systems and water supply. The large majority of fee-owned lands were recommended to remain in SFWMD ownership in their current uses.

Throughout the process, the District actively encouraged public and stakeholder participation. Outreach efforts included:

- Utilizing a dedicated web page (www.sfwmd.gov/landassessment) to post more than 600 pages of land profiles, staff recommendations for each of the five regions, presentations from public meetings and a variety of other documents
- Receiving nearly 1,500 public and stakeholder comments and more than 400 responses from SFWMD subject matter experts
- Holding 12 regional public workshops throughout the assessment process at various locations around South Florida
- Providing the Water Resources Advisory Commission (WRAC) and Governing Board with regular updates at their monthly public meetings

For more information on surplus lands, visit www.sfwmd.gov/landresources and click the Surplus Land link. More details on the SFWMD land assessment process — including a complete list of fee-owned properties that were identified for possible surplus or exchange — are available at www.sfwmd.gov/landassessment.

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SFWMD to Repair Dams Along 'Wild and Scenic' Loxahatchee River

Work will benefit the ecology of the river and improve recreational access



The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has begun preliminary work to repair dams along portions of the federally designated "Wild and Scenic" Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River. The dams help hold water at levels that benefit the diverse ecology of the river's ecosystem.

"The District continues working to protect and restore the Loxahatchee River," said SFWMD Executive Director Blake Guillory. "Last year's purchase of the Mecca property for water storage, plus upgrades to these dams, will provide benefits to the river for many years to come."

The Masten and Lainhart dams are small but essential features along the Wild and Scenic River. By holding back water and maintaining levels that benefit native plants and wildlife, the scenic river's ecosystem can thrive. Along its floodplain are vegetation such as bald cypress and mangroves and wildlife such as alligators, turtles and otters.

Work will include resetting cypress logs that give the dams a natural look and repairs to the embankments to prevent water from flowing around the structures. Surveyors have already begun marking trees with flags to identify their locations. This helps engineers plan and carry out the improvements in a way that protects the surrounding ecosystem.

Along with the repair work, the District will improve recreational access and safety at the canoe and kayak dockage at the dams.

Historically, canoeing has been the main recreational use of the Northwest Fork and its surrounding area. Other popular activities include kayaking, fishing, nature study, wildlife observation and photography.

Loxahatchee History

On May 17, 1985, 7.6 miles of the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River were designated as a national Wild and Scenic River. Under the National Wild and Scenic River Act of 1968, free-flowing rivers with outstanding scenic, recreational, fish and wildlife, historic and cultural values are designated for preservation for the enjoyment and benefit of present and future generations.

The Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River — from Riverbend Park in Jupiter downstream to Jonathan Dickinson State Park in Martin County — was the first Florida river to receive this designation.

Since 1985, the SFWMD has acquired more than 20,000 acres of land in the Loxahatchee River's corridor and tributary watersheds for preservation and restoration. Through the Loxahatchee River Preservation Initiative, numerous agencies and local governments have worked together on 65 habitat and water quality restoration projects, most of which have been completed. Nearly \$18 million

in legislative appropriations have been matched by more than \$23 million in local funds to accomplish this work.

In October 2013, the SFWMD Governing Board approved a \$26 million investment to acquire the 1,800-acre Mecca property from Palm Beach County. Located west of the Beeline Highway, the parcel will become a shallow-water storage area capable of sending water east through the C-18 canal and into the Northwest Fork of the river. Key objectives are to supplement flows during the dry season and help prevent saltwater intrusion into the lower reaches of the river.

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Raptor Recovering After Rescue in Everglades Water-Cleaning Wetland

Injured osprey was discovered during routine maintenance; taken to a wildlife facility



Perched on a levee with an injured wing and alligators watching it from a canal below, the osprey could fly no more than 2 feet at a time.

South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) wildlife coordinator Brian Garrett had to act quickly to capture the injured raptor before the avian predator became reptile prey on a late February morning in western Palm Beach County.

With a well-timed grab at the edge of the canal, Garrett secured the adult bird. The large raptor, which appeared to be otherwise healthy, was transported from Stormwater Treatment Area 2 to the Busch Wildlife Sanctuary in Jupiter, where it was treated for a broken left wing.

"It's a good day when you can go out and rescue one," said Garrett. As a biologist for 17 years at the District, Garrett's wildlife surveys and knowledge assist water and land managers in protecting and restoring wildlife species such the endangered Everglade snail

kite, gopher tortoises and manatees.

The injured osprey is being rehabilitated at Busch Wildlife Sanctuary. It was unknown what caused the wing fracture, but it could have been anything from a collision with a tree to a hard water landing, according to the sanctuary's Executive Director David Hitzig.

"It's got a lot of spunk," Hitzig said. "Hopefully, the bird can be released back into the wild when it's healed."

Sanctuary officials said the type of fracture the osprey suffered typically takes six to eight weeks to heal. The bird would then be transferred to a flight enclosure to evaluate its potential to be released back into the wild.

Raptor rescues are uncommon by District staff on SFWMD-managed lands.

"It's the first time I've ever had to rescue a raptor in the field," Garrett said.

While the rescue was rare, ospreys are the most common raptors on District public lands because the species are piscivores, meaning they almost exclusively hunt and consume fish. Thus, the birds require nearby bodies of water that contain plenty of fish on which to forage.

The District manages nearly 1.5 million acres of public land, including 57,000 acres of Stormwater Treatment Areas. The primary job of these wetlands is to improve Everglades water quality, but they have also become a haven for wildlife, especially birds, because of their prime habitat and availability of food.

Populations of ospreys in North America have experienced a dramatic comeback since the use of the pesticide DDT was banned in the United States during 1972. There were fewer than 8,000 breeding pairs of ospreys in 1981. By 1994, the number of osprey had risen to 14,246 pairs.

For more information, visit the [Busch Wildlife Sanctuary's website](#). To see a short video of the osprey, [click here](#).

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