



PLANNING STRATEGIES FOR THE
EVERGLADES AGRICULTURAL AREA



*1000 Friends of Florida
October 2009*

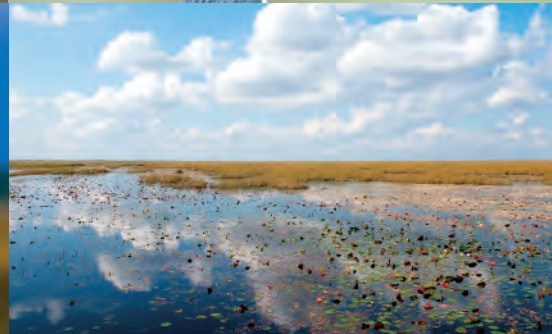




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The Everglades is a special place, a truly unique and distinctive American ecosystem. But more than a century of mismanagement has taken a devastating toll on the “River of Grass.” When the Everglades Restoration plan and project became a reality with the passage of the Water Resources Development Act of 2000, environmental and civic groups, local, state and federal government officials and others celebrated the possibilities of a restored Everglades ecosystem, the resurgence of beleaguered wildlife, and the end to damaging freshwater surges to estuaries. Over these past nine years, billions of public dollars have been devoted to this goal. Some restoration projects have been completed, but much more needs to be done.

Encompassing approximately 700,000 acres, the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) is an integral part of the greater Everglades ecosystem. While the region had been farmed since the early 1900s, the EAA was formally designated for agriculture in 1948 under the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s Central and South Florida Flood Control Project. The only remaining privately owned large land mass in southern Florida with virtually no development, today the EAA plays an enormously important role in future Everglades restoration due to its great size, central location, and large areas of land available for additional water management and restoration projects.

In 2008, Florida Governor Charlie Crist proposed buying out 184,000 acres of the U.S. Sugar Corporation’s vast land holdings in the EAA. With budgetary constraints due to a drawn-out recession, the acreage to be purchased has dropped to 72,500 acres, still encompassing an area nearly twice the size of Orlando. This purchase still could make possible the restoration of a watery connection from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, and then south and ultimately to the Florida Bay. It would provide more natural storage, cleansing, and the re-connection of a portion of the historic Everglades. But with many details yet to be worked out, it is uncertain when this dream will become a reality.

While great effort and billions of dollars have been expended on the scientific and engineering aspects of Everglades restoration, scant attention has been paid to the tremendous development pressures facing the fringes of the Everglades, including the EAA. According to 1000 Friends of Florida’s 2006 report, *Florida 2060*, the 11 counties comprising South Florida are anticipated to more than double in population over the next 50 years, from 6,373,139 in 2005 to 13,918,649 in 2060. If current development patterns continue, almost two-and-a-half times as much urban land will be required to accommodate this population, from 1,248,327 acres in 2005 to 2,908,633 acres in 2060. If not appropriately directed, these pressures could undermine Everglades restoration efforts.



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The EAA is already facing a number of planning-related threats that could result in the fragmentation of this large, open tract of land that is so essential to Everglades restoration. These threats include rapid land use changes in the area, and proposals for mining, an inland port, and solid waste facilities. Sound, sustainable planning for the EAA is essential if Everglades restoration is to succeed.

To be successful, such efforts must:

- Address immediate planning threats as they arise, including proposals for inappropriate development, mining, infrastructure and other projects in the EAA and its fringes.
- Promote a regional approach to long-term planning for the EAA, based on a working partnership between state, regional and local leaders.
- Develop a comprehensive sustainable economic development plan for the region that addresses the economic needs of the area's residents in a manner compatible with Everglades restoration.

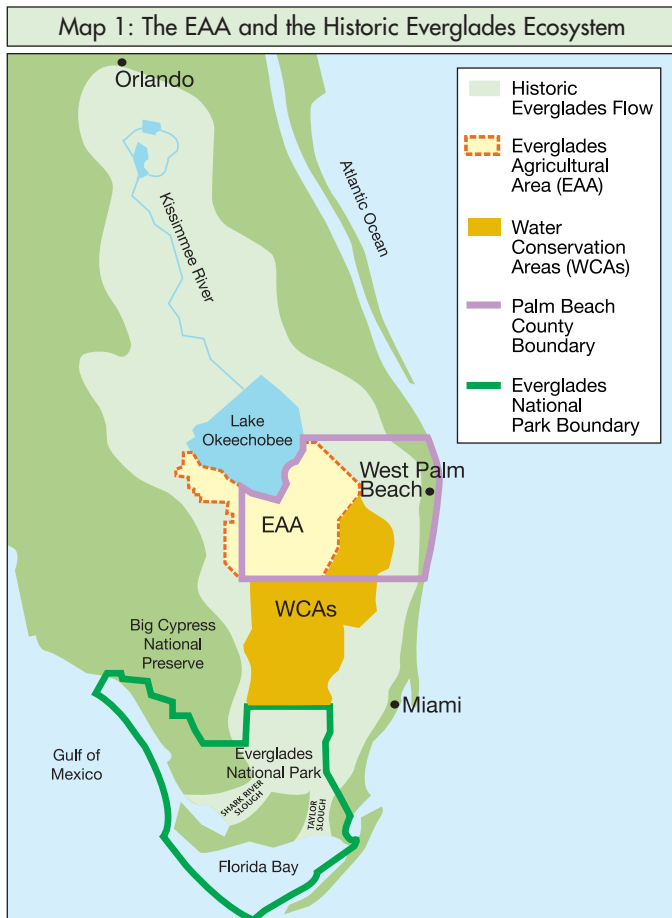
Immediate steps include delaying any land use changes outside municipal boundaries in the EAA until long-range, regional planning is completed, encouraging the continuation of agriculture within the EAA in conjunction with restoration, and providing sustainable economic development opportunities for the Glades communities. To succeed, there must be the commitment and dedication by all agencies to create a plan as quickly as is possible.

BACKGROUND

The EAA is a key region in the Everglades ecosystem. Its predominant land use is agriculture and, according to the *2003 Everglades Program Best Management Practices Annual Report*, more than 500,000 of its 700,000 acres are in irrigated land. Sugar cane is the primary crop with about 50 percent of the sugar produced nationally harvested in the EAA. Other major crops include leafy vegetables, root crops, radishes, sweet corn, rice, sod, tomatoes, and peppers.

Fifteen canals and 25 control structures managed by the South Florida Water Management District are located within and serve the EAA. Additionally, the EAA includes the 25,000-acre Rotenberger and 35,500-acre Holey Land Wildlife Management Areas, the 1000-acre L-8 Reservoir/Palm Beach Aggregates rock pits, and 43,000 acres of Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs).

Efforts to drain the EAA, including the construction of the Herbert Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee, supported the needs of agriculture but eliminated the majority of the Everglades' external water supply. Water that historically flowed south through what is now called the EAA was directed to the east and west via the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers, causing serious harm to coastal estuaries from the high volume, polluted fresh water releases from Lake Okeechobee. These drainage efforts, combined with lowered Lake Okeechobee water levels, have decreased the available quantity of natural water storage within the EAA. This has amplified the susceptibility of the Everglades ecosystem to damaging floods, drought, and increased pollution. In order to provide the Everglades with



the water it needs to survive, the storage that was available in the pre-drained natural system must be re-created.

The 2000 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) calls for the creation of huge quantities of storage for release during drought times. This can be used to restore

a more natural flow and timing to the ecosystem, protect the public water supply, and prevent excessive freshwater discharge to the estuaries. CERP's success is dependent on the ability to provide the storage necessary for this vast quantity of water. During the planning process for CERP, restoration agencies relied on an assumption that untested large-scale Aquifer Storage and Recovery technology (ASR) could be used to provide upwards of 80 percent of the water storage necessary to restore the Everglades. It now appears that ASR cannot be relied upon to meet anything near this storage goal. In recognition of the likely storage shortfall, CERP planners have long promised to develop ASR contingency plans, but no such plans have been delivered to date.

Significantly more water storage is needed in the strategically located EAA if restoration of the Everglades is to succeed. Expanding the spatial extent of wetlands has always been considered an important component of Everglades restoration. Now, overcoming the uncertainty associated with ASR warrants increased reliance on existing or restored wetlands for storage needs.

The state's purchase of U.S. Sugar lands would provide the opportunity for the long-awaited and absolutely necessary plan to provide water storage that realistically cannot be provided by ASR. Even with the best intentions, however, decisions affecting land use could severely constrain the ability to create the best restoration scenario. Optimum restoration will not be possible if conflicting uses—such as mines, and commercial, residential, or industrial development—are allowed or are inappropriately sited in the EAA. For example, introduction of a mine or an inland port (or both) below Lake Okeechobee will, at minimum, constrain the creation of



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

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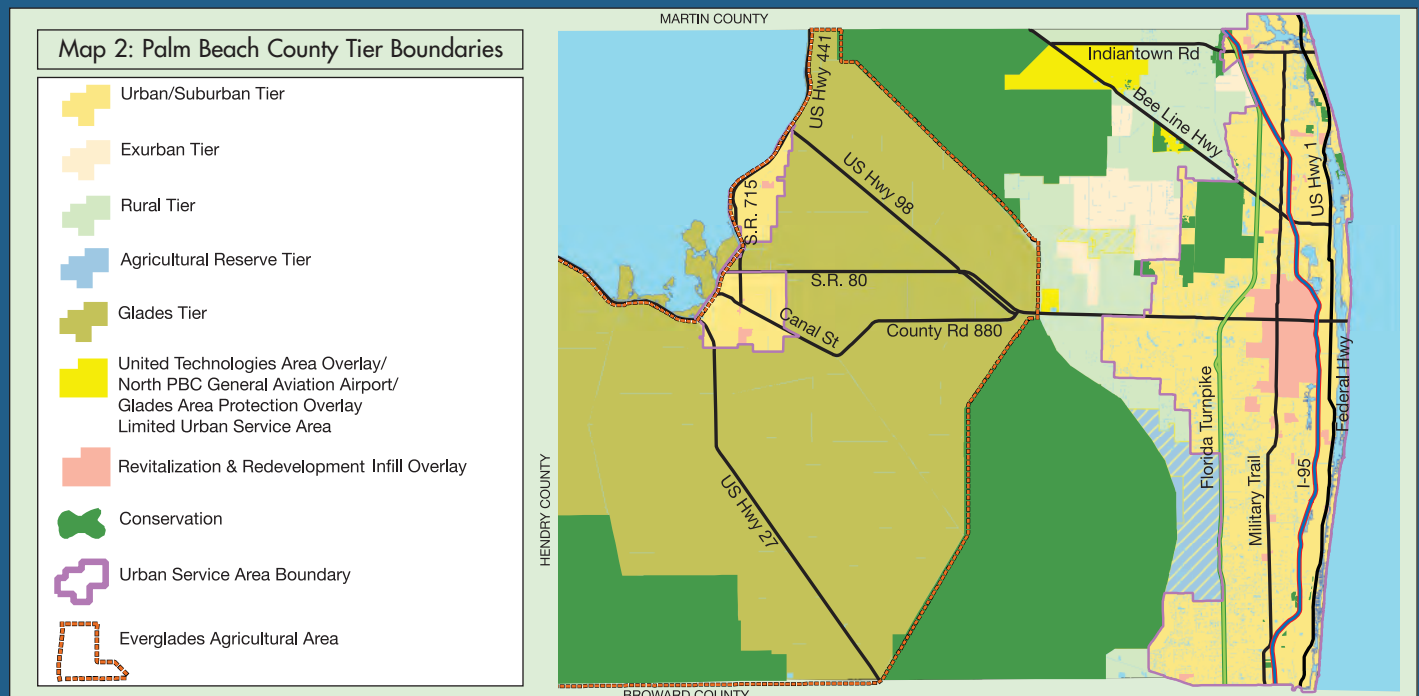
storage and flows south to Water Conservation Area 3. Worse, speculative land owners and developers could object to the possibility of flooding and stop the project altogether, either through pressure on local government, legal action or through lobbying for legislative action.

It is therefore extremely important to take a pause from allowing land use changes that could impact or impede restoration until the land is purchased, swaps are negotiated and a plan for restoration is in place. Agricultural use must be supported and allowed to continue as it has for many years.

THE LAND USE PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Of the 700,000 acres included in the EAA, 500,000 acres lie within the jurisdiction of the Palm Beach County Commission. In the absence of a formalized state and local multi-stakeholder approach to EAA planning, this commission is one of the most important policy-making bodies affecting Everglades restoration options. Land uses authorized by the commission can either augment or limit state, regional and local government's ability to seek alternative water storage.

Palm Beach County's economy is highly dependent on agriculture, both in the EAA and elsewhere. According to the





University of Florida's Institute of Farming and Agricultural Services (IFAS), in 2004 agriculture sales in Palm Beach County totaled \$1.205 billion, representing an estimated economic impact of over \$2 billion for the county, including over \$380 million in agricultural wages. IFAS also found that while farmland pays property taxes for education, county libraries, and other services, it does not use many of these services.

Palm Beach County's adopted comprehensive plans and policies include numerous provisions intended to protect agriculture and limit development in the EAA. Additionally, state and regional plans include provisions to protect critical agricultural lands in Florida which can be used to ensure that land use decisions regarding the EAA are compatible with restoration and the preservation of agriculture.

Palm Beach County's Comprehensive Plan utilizes a "tier system" (see Map 2 pictured left) which "defines distinct geographical areas within the County that currently either support or are anticipated to accommodate various types of development patterns and service delivery provisions that, together, allow for a diverse range of lifestyle choices, and livable, sustainable communities." The EAA is within the "Glades Tier," which is "generally located west of the Conservation Areas and Twenty Mile Bend, and includes the Glades Communities of Pahokee, South Bay and Belle Glade. This area is designated primarily for specialized agricultural operations." This plan can be used to guide uses not related to agriculture, and mining is allowed under very limited conditions.

In 2004, Palm Beach County issued its most recent Evaluation and Appraisal (EAR) Report. This state-mandated report outlined recommended updates to the County's

comprehensive plan. In this report, the County indicated a strong desire to retain and support agriculture in the EAA, but identified several issues of significance for the region. Generally, the EAR found that, as the County reaches build-out, additional development pressures are being placed on the Everglades Agricultural Area.

The EAR noted that the County considers the EAA prime agricultural land with regional, state and national significance, and acknowledges that some analysts give the EAA global significance in the face of future food shortages around the world. It found that "a management strategy is needed to effectively protect the EAA as a regional resource of food production with distribution in proximity to large population centers. CERP restoration goals necessitate the continuity of this strategy to assure the future sustainability of water resources for human consumption, natural systems and agriculture."

Palm Beach County's tier system calls for the protection of the EAA. It considers the eastern boundary of the EAA, the Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge, and the Corbett Wildlife Management Area as firm boundaries to contain western sprawl, similar to the role the eastern Everglades boundary has played in Broward County. The EAR recognized that in areas dedicated to large-scale agricultural operations, residential development is restricted to farm-related dwellings, due to the County's commitment to preserve agriculture.

The EAR also found that developable areas east of the Glades Agricultural Production Area can absorb the County's projected population beyond the year 2025 with current and proposed future land uses, the implementation



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of mixed use development areas where feasible, and the creation of the Urban Redevelopment Area (URA) which allows increased densities and intensities through infill, redevelopment and revitalization programs. Accordingly, the EAR concluded that the western boundaries of the coastal tiers do not need to be expanded further west in order to accommodate projected population and development activities beyond the County's planning horizon of 2025. This means that there is no need for urban development in the EAA for a very long time.

Under Palm Beach County's adopted comprehensive plan, the agricultural areas of the EAA in Palm Beach County have a land use designation of Agricultural Production (AP). Most allowed uses must be directly related to agriculture. Residential uses are limited to those directly related to agriculture, such as farmworker housing, which can be approved only on a case-by-case basis. However, there is an exception for existing residential and non-residential development that was approved prior to the 1989 Plan adoption. Mining, subject to limitations, and communication facilities are also allowed, as are parks and recreation uses, and utilities and transportation facilities intended to serve county-wide, regional and/or state needs, with special review. In light of recent rises in fuel costs, representatives of bio-fuel businesses are actively pursuing changes that would allow the bio-fuel industry to locate in the area.

In 2004, Palm Beach County adopted the Glades Area Protection Overlay (GAPO). Its purpose is "to protect the Agricultural Production Area in ... the EAA from encroachment by urban and other uses that will be detrimental to the viability and continuity of agricultural

activities, existing and future conservation areas, and Everglades restoration programs and projects." This overlay is intended to create a barrier to the expansion of urban and suburban activities into the Agricultural Production areas in the Glades Tier, beyond the western limits of the overlay, while recognizing existing uses and allowing new development within the overlay. The GAPO is generally located just east of 20 mile bend, north of Southern Boulevard and east and west of the L-8 canal.

Complementing these local plans, Florida law provides strong support for agricultural use over urban. The Agriculture Goal in the State Comprehensive Plan provides that: "Florida shall maintain and strive to expand its food, agriculture, ornamental horticulture, aquaculture, forestry, and related industries in order to be a healthy and competitive force in the national and international marketplace." The Treasure Coast Comprehensive Regional Policy Plan also stresses the importance of agriculture to Palm Beach County. In addition, clear and specific provisions of Florida's Growth Management Act and its implementing administrative rule (Rule 9J-5, Fla. Admin. Code) discourage the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses.

Despite this strong land use planning framework that supports the continuation of agriculture in the EAA, the region is facing a series of planning-related threats. To address these threats in a manner that does not undermine Everglades restoration, action must be taken to address immediate planning threats, take a regional approach to promote better long-term planning for the EAA and surrounding areas, and develop creative, workable solutions to the economic problems facing the Glades communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

ADDRESS IMMEDIATE PLANNING THREATS

In recent years, the EAA has come under increasing threat from incompatible land uses. Proposals for mining, incompatible residential development, landfills, and an inland port have all been raised and, in some cases, approved. There needs to be heightened education and advocacy to ensure that elected officials and staff, the media and the public truly understand the short- and long-term impacts of such projects on the environmental health of the region and on Everglades restoration.

It is imperative that any new proposals for such activities in or adjacent to the EAA receive heightened scrutiny in the planning process. When making local planning decisions, county and municipal governments must make those decisions consistent in strict adherence to the intent of the Comprehensive Plan and with Everglades restoration goals in mind. When the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA) reviews proposed changes to local comprehensive plans in the region, it should also require consistency with Everglades restoration goals. If necessary, Rule 9J-5 should be amended to specifically authorize DCA to require such consistency.

In those instances where education and advocacy do not work, legal options must be pursued to halt inappropriate projects that are inconsistent with local, regional and/or state plans and policies.

Mining—There has been increased pressure from the mining industry to open the EAA to large-scale mining activity,

Figure A: Palm Beach County Mining Statistics

IN OPERATION

PALM BEACH AGGREGATES – Mining was approved for 33.5 years at a rate of 80 acres per year and at an average depth of 50 feet. A total of 770 acres have been mined, with 2,674 acres remaining.

BERGERON (STAR RANCH) – Mining was approved in 1978 for 30 years at a rate of 13 acres per year and at an average depth of 50 feet. A total of 392 acres have been mined.

PENDING LOCAL, STATE, AND/OR FEDERAL APPROVALS

STEWART MINE PBC – In 2006 Palm Beach County approved mining for 40 years until 2055 for a total of 5,420 acres, at a rate of 90 acres per year and an average depth of 50 feet.

SOUTH BAY QUARRY (RINKER) – The proposal is for mining for 38 years until 2049 at a rate of 79.3 acres per year. A total of 3,014 of 3,774 acres are to be mined, at an average depth 60 feet.

LAKE HARBOR QUARRY (FLORIDA ROCK) – The proposal is for mining for 74 years until 2083, at a rate of 95 acres per year. A total of 7,036 of 7,629 are to be mined, at an average depth 50 feet.

BERGERON EXPANSION (STAR RANCH) – The proposal is for a 553-acre expansion of mining.

FIVE SMOOTH STONES – This mine is still pending, and has been taken over by Florida Rock.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

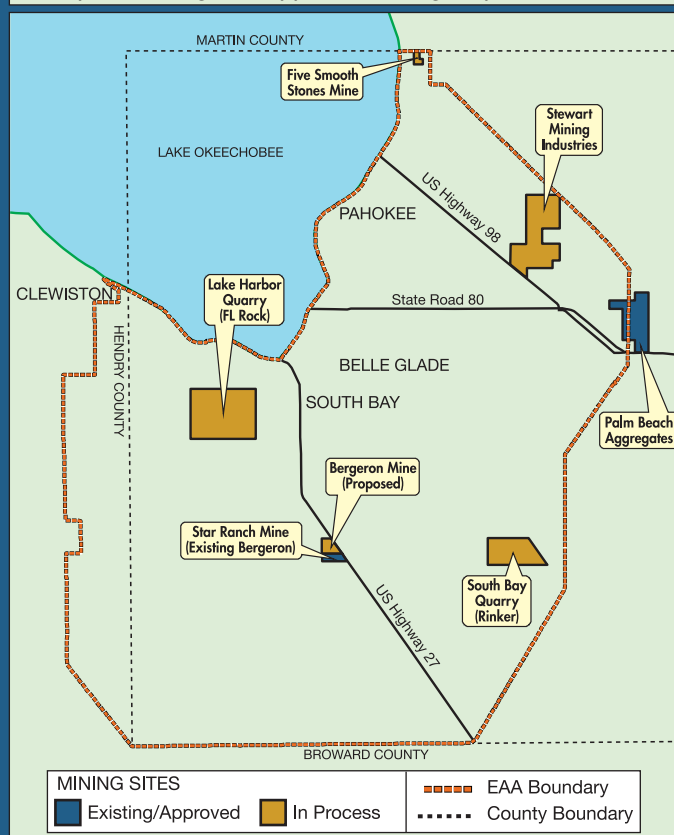
perhaps in part as a response to legal troubles in the Lakebelt Region of Miami-Dade County. Over the objections of several conservation groups, Palm Beach County recently approved two new extremely large commercial mining operations within the EAA, and an expansion of an existing one. The Stewart Mine, encompassing more than 5,000 acres east of Lake Okeechobee, was approved by the

commission a few years ago but still awaits permits to begin operations. One mine, Lake Harbor, on U.S. Sugar land, would allow large-scale commercial limerock mining on nearly 7,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee, directly in the footprint of the newly proposed acquisition area, and potentially within the restoration area itself. If permitted, these mines would encompass more than 15,000 acres. When combined with other mining operations, nearly 20,000 acres of EAA lands would be excavated to depths of up to 60 to 80 feet if they meet the requirements of a depth waiver. The Palm Beach County mining statistics shown in Figure A on page 9 lists mining activity at the date of this publication.

These mines have the potential to cause serious environmental harm and negatively impact Everglades restoration by reducing the feasibility of future phases of the restoration project. Potential impacts are far-ranging and cumulative and include:

- Groundwater/surface water contamination, including chlorides, sulfates, total dissolved solids, and benzene.
- Decreased phosphorus removal in the Stormwater Treatment Areas.
- Increased contamination in the Everglades from bio-available mercury.
- Magnified drought damages in Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.
- Impairment of basic Everglades wetland function, including soil formation and primary productivity.

Map 3: Pending and Approved Mining Projects in the EAA





- Elimination of the most technologically viable and most cost-effective options for Everglades restoration.
- Long-term delays to restoration project construction because of interference from mining activities.
- Impacts to threatened and endangered species. A number of federally listed species including but not limited to the Florida panther, eastern indigo snake, wood stork, and Everglades snail kite are known to be present in the EAA. Conversion of agricultural lands to open water and the associated mining activities may adversely affect many of these species.

Recent zoning approvals of mines have taken place despite a series of plans and studies calling for limiting such use. In response to concerns about mining in the EAA and other parts of the state, the Florida legislature established the 19-member Strategic Aggregates Review Task Force in 2007 to study this issue and develop recommendations for the state. Its members represented the mining, construction, and transportation industries, local officials, environmental representatives and designees of the Florida Departments of Transportation, Environmental Protection and Community Affairs.

Key findings of the Task Force included the following:

- Facts do **not** support a claim that there is a crisis resulting from a lack of available aggregate.
- The slowdown in the construction industry has reduced the demand for aggregate.

- State law leaves major gaps in public protections related to mining.
- Only local governments have the current legal authority to address issues such as community compatibility, safety, upland habitat protection, smaller wetlands, water supply, and other issues currently unregulated by the State.

The Consensus Recommendations of the Task Force called for:

- Preparing an inventory of “mineable” aggregate resources.
- Improving coordination among local and state agencies.
- Limiting encroachment of suburban sprawl development towards existing mines.
- Siting and permitting mines in a manner compatible with Florida’s environment and communities.
- Encouraging the use of suitable recyclable and alternative materials to extend aggregate reserves.

In addition to the findings of this study, the Palm Beach County Comprehensive Plan allows mining within the EAA only for specific mining proposals that meet specific environmental, water quality, and land use compatibility requirements.

Within the Agricultural Production Future Land Use designation (such as the EAA), mining may be permitted **only** to support public roadway projects or agricultural activities, or water management projects associated with ecosystem restoration, regional water supply or flood



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EVERGLADES FOUNDATION

protection on sites identified by the South Florida Water Management District or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers where such uses provide viable alternative technologies for water management.

The Plan and the County's regulations include clear limitations, including requiring that the County regulate mining and excavation activities to ensure that such activities are appropriately located to be compatible with surrounding land uses. They also must be conducted in a manner that is environmentally sound, does not adversely impact the health of citizens, and ensures that disturbed areas are reclaimed in an appropriate and timely manner.

All of the proposed mines have limited the annual excavation acreage to less than 100 acres per year. In so doing, they have avoided review of the projects as Developments of Regional Impact. Proposed new mines are also contemplating using the aggregate for building and construction other than roads.

Development Pressures—For a host of reasons, there is increased pressure to convert additional land in the EAA and on its fringes to development or other non-agricultural uses. Within the EAA, Pahokee has tried unsuccessfully to annex up to 3,000 acres for additional development, and other communities want to increase their capability to make land available for industry or other economic engines. Instead of annexation, Glades communities should be encouraged to explore more compact patterns of growth within existing municipal boundaries. Compact development has many benefits. It can add multiple layers of land uses on a smaller footprint, providing increased economic viability for the community and its residents

without the major infrastructure costs associated with sprawling development patterns. Because of its compact nature, it can be walkable and transit-oriented, and provide residents with a range of housing options. The many economic, health and quality-of-life benefits of compact development have been well documented.

On the other hand, inappropriate, sprawling development and associated flood control, urban pollution, and infrastructure in the EAA would seriously compromise Everglades restoration and threaten future water supply for natural and human systems. In addition, it would drive up the local government's cost to provide services. Adding human development to lands below the surface of Lake Okeechobee's normal water levels creates a New Orleans-type situation that would be undesirable as most EAA lands are less than 10-12 feet in elevation while the normal annual high water level in Lake Okeechobee is at 15 feet or above. For all these reasons, a strategic approach to new development in the EAA is urgently needed, and must take these matters into consideration.

Solid Waste Facilities—The Palm Beach County Solid Waste Authority has proposed to site a solid waste municipal landfill directly adjacent to the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. In response to significant concerns expressed by Refuge staff and the environmental community, the Solid Waste Authority has undertaken an evaluation of alternative sites, but has not committed to relocate this harmful use. A second landfill proposal, to store residuals from the Florida Crystals Okeelanta Co-generation Plant, was approved by the County in 2007. Landfills attract large numbers of birds,



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EVERGLADES FOUNDATION

many often predators, which, when located near a wildlife area or restoration area will prey on the young of other bird species, upsetting the natural balance and further endangering sensitive species. In addition, water running off the site may become contaminated with nutrients, metals and other pollution.

Inland Port—An immense inland port has been proposed for six sites in Palm Beach, Martin and Hendry counties, as shown on Map 4. The name “port” is somewhat misleading as the facility will not have water access, but rather will serve as a massive regional storage and distribution facility for container cargo from existing South Florida ports. The

selected rural site would be accessible by truck and rail, and could possibly include light manufacturing operations, a free trade zone and an airport. The facility would also include between 40 and 80 million square feet of storage facilities on as much as 3,500 acres of land.

A 2007 study for the Port of Palm Beach estimated that 500 jobs could be created for every 1 million square feet of storage, providing an attractive economic development opportunity for Glades communities concerned about the loss of U.S. Sugar jobs. One site under consideration is the Okeelanta - Florida Crystals site which is located within the EAA. The Palm Beach County Commission has indicated that it will consider designating Okeelanta as an industrial park if it is not selected as the inland port site. This, too, would have serious ramifications for Everglades restoration.

The proposed inland port (or industrial park) could create a number of possibly insurmountable barriers to Everglades Restoration. Care needs to be taken that the facility is not sited in a location that will impede and/or add considerable costs to efforts to restore the Everglades. In addition to the location of the inland port (or industrial park) itself, the siting of related infrastructure to service the massive new facility, including new roads and rail lines, also requires careful scrutiny. Both direct environmental impacts as well as the impacts of the facility triggering additional land use changes in the vicinity would need to be considered. While economic relief is clearly needed for the Glades communities, such efforts must be taken in a

Map 4: Proposed Inland Port Sites

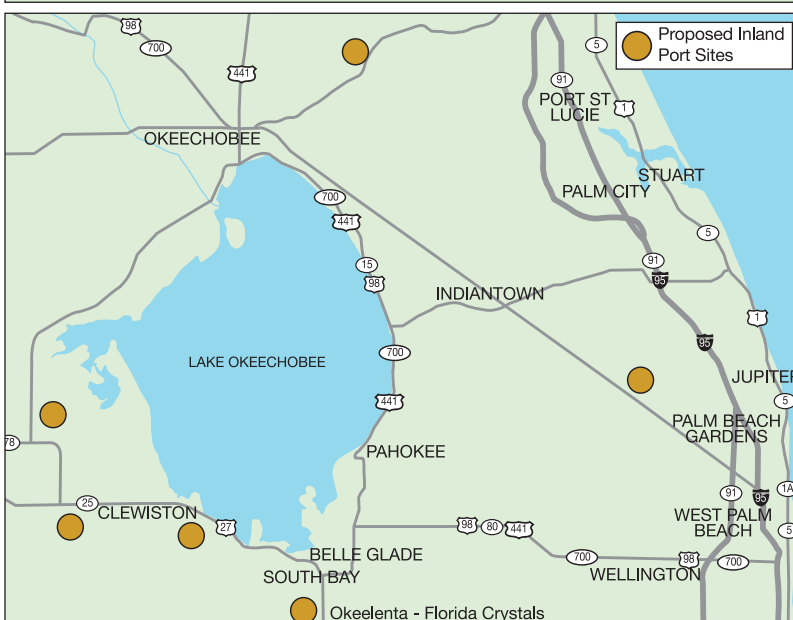




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manner that is sustainable and compatible with the overall goal of Everglades restoration.

PROMOTE REGIONAL, LONG-TERM PLANNING

Land use remains the single most important factor in making sure the land that is needed for water storage and cleansing is available when the Everglades restoration work plan is ready for implementation. If land has been taken out of the equation for other uses in a piece by piece fashion, there will be no way to get it back. Local and state officials are urged to pause before creating a situation where restoration is impossible due to lack of or fragmentation of land. In addition to addressing proposed development on a case-by-case basis, there must be increased emphasis on promoting regional, long-term planning for the EAA and its fringes to better protect Everglades resources.

There are a series of approaches that should be evaluated. These include considering the use of the Area of Critical State Concern (ACSC) program under F.S. 380.05. The Everglades Coalition (an alliance of 51 national, state, and local organizations that advocate for the restoration, protection and enhancement of the greater Everglades ecosystem) has recommended that the state begin the process for possible designation of the Everglades Agricultural Area as an ACSC. This would mean that the Governor, upon the recommendation from DCA, would create a Resource Planning and Management Committee (RPMC). This committee would include representative stakeholders and provide a forum for the affected local governments, relevant state agencies, the regional planning council, the water management district and other affected stakeholders to identify and seek solutions to resolve

existing—and prevent future—problems which may endanger the resources in the area. The RPMC could be used to identify long term management options needed to protect state water infrastructure and significant environmental resources and promote sustainable economic development in a manner compatible with Everglades restoration.

It is our hope that with the active participation of all stakeholders, solutions and strategies would be developed so that the need for a more formal ACSC designation would not be necessary. Should this Committee not reach an acceptable consensus, then the Governor would be in a position to ask the Cabinet, sitting as the Administration Commission, to formally consider designating the EAA as an Area of Critical State Concern, including Principles for Guiding Development.

Other options to protect the EAA and surrounding lands include to increase focus on permanently securing more natural and agricultural lands, using state land acquisition and protection programs and other mechanisms as available. For those areas in and adjacent to the EAA where development confronts and threatens Everglades restoration objectives, the “Wekiva Task Force” model might prove useful. Policies and incentives could be used to prevent fragmentation of natural areas by new roads, urban development, or adverse mining activities. Additionally, policies and incentives could be put in place to ensure that new development in existing communities is compact in form and is located inside urban service districts, and that urban infill and redevelopment are encouraged in order to bring an end to damaging patterns of sprawl.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOANNE DAVIS

DEVELOP CREATIVE, WORKABLE SOLUTIONS TO THE REGION'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

A series of small agricultural communities near Lake Okeechobee comprise the region's residential and commercial base. They are surrounded by hundreds of thousands of acres of land in active agricultural production. Long troubled by economic issues and, until recently, a substandard water supply, the Glades communities merit attention in the form of economic development opportunities, education, training and an increased focus on public health. These communities—Pahokee, South Bay, Canal Point, and Belle Glade—need new economic development opportunities, especially if the U.S. Sugar buyout goes through and the company winds down its operations over the next six years. It is important to thoughtfully engage citizens, leaders and experts to find economic relief that is compatible with restoration so that people in the Glades communities can find long term, sustainable employment. One option may be to use the RPMC described in the previous section as the forum to identify and assess economic development strategies for the EAA, including that part of both Palm Beach and Hendry counties.

Clewiston, in Hendry County, is a company town, with nearly the entire employment base and local economy dependent upon the U.S. Sugar Corporation. The advent of the U.S. Sugar buyout is already having significant negative impacts on the town, its people and its future. Citizens are extremely concerned that the state's ambitious plans will leave them behind. However, if a transition plan is put together that eases some sugar operations out and ushers new, green jobs in, restoration itself could prove to be a major employment base. Construction, equipment operation,

nurseries, science, transportation, engineering, and landscaping are but a few of the employment opportunities to explore for Clewiston and the other Glades communities.

The Glades communities must not be left out, and plans for Everglades restoration should include a parallel course of assistance with discovering and creating a new, more sustainable base of employment opportunities. The Glades communities, and particularly Clewiston, are limited in what they can do economically because of the dependence on U.S. Sugar for most employment opportunities in the region. The state must assist with the transition through Florida's Office of Trade, Tourism and Economic Development (OTTED). Additionally, U.S. Sugar is receiving top dollar from the state's contract, and after many decades of community loyalty, it is appropriate for the company to give back to its community. The Mott Family Foundation was set up to serve the residents of the region, and should continue this service. An endowment towards economic development could be the top priority, and would go far toward healing the deep chasm it will leave behind. This act would relieve tensions and provide tangible hope for revitalizing the economy of the communities.

Within the lakeside municipalities of the EAA in Palm Beach County (Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay), a variety of urban, suburban and rural land uses are provided. Under Palm Beach County's Comprehensive Plan these areas, as well as planned future expansion areas, are within the urban services district which affords them an urban level of service. The Comprehensive Plan notes that "communities within the Glades Tier are engaged in their own efforts with regard to planning and development.



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This effort is mainly in the form of economic development programming. The geographical distance and the nature of the issues faced by the Glades communities differ from the challenges faced by the coastal communities to manage growth. These factors warrant a separate initiative to further develop the Glades Tier, in conjunction with the Glades municipalities, business community and area residents.”

Palm Beach County has known for years that the Glades communities need assistance in creating more sustainable conditions there. The buyout offers county leaders the opportunity to do something beyond discussing the problems by creating new initiatives and programs inside urban boundaries. Partnering with community leaders and business interests such as the Economic Council and the Business Development Board may provide insight and options not previously discovered.

CONCLUSION

We are at a critical juncture regarding the success of Everglades restoration. The Everglades Agricultural Area must be protected from incompatible land uses, comprehensive land use planning must be implemented, and its strategic role with regard to water storage must be better understood and implemented. The EAA holds the key to Everglades restoration, and we must seize the opportunity now to address the needs of this critical area to ensure measurable ecological responses to restoration. The result will be a restored ecosystem that will improve wildlife habitat, facilitate water conveyance through the

Everglades, as well as increase water supply and improve water quality for future generations.

The ecological restoration of the Everglades is a major undertaking; one the world will see and remember. Along with the natural communities, our human communities need restoration; of jobs, of basic economics, of pride in new accomplishments. Both are important, and both can support one another through open and thoughtful public discourse.

Business interests have recently begun to see the EAA as a new venue for land use changes that bring potential conflicts with restoration. Conservation interests have questioned the need for these approvals before the Everglades restoration plan is designed. It is important for officials to look carefully on the impact these uses may have, and to thoughtfully consider all the issues related to the EAA, the Glades communities, and Everglades restoration prior to making sweeping changes that could upset the entire region on many different levels. Careful attention to land use is extremely important, as seen in escalated land values in the U.S. Sugar purchase; and local government actions can have profound consequences. Delaying or denying land use changes provides opportunities for state and local governments to assess what is truly best from a large scale, comprehensive point of view.

There is but one Everglades. Let us use caution, wisdom and the best science to guide us in making decisions that result in a restored ecosystem, healthier communities, and long term sustainability for this critical region.

APPENDIX

Everglades Coalition and Everglades Foundation Recommendations Concerning the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) July 30, 2008

IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

As the state of Florida moves ahead with acquisition of U.S. Sugar and works to compile contiguous tracts of land, the Everglades Coalition recommends the following:

1. The State of Florida should maximize acreage of land purchased for conveyance, water storage, and treatment. This is a singular opportunity of which full advantage must be taken. At a minimum, the State must ensure that the restoration plans that result from this land acquisition will provide an adequate supply of clean water for the Everglades and:

- Fully evaluate all options for restoring flow through the EAA, including the Plan 6 Flowway option, in a public process with maximum stakeholder involvement.
- Eliminate excess phosphorus discharges into the Everglades. Existing deficits call for expansion of STA-1W and STA-5 by a minimum of 12,000 acres.
- Guarantee a reliable water supply for the Everglades during drought and significantly reduce damaging releases through the estuaries by providing a minimum of 1 million to 1.5 million acre feet of storage.
- During wet years, further decrease damaging releases to the estuaries by moving approximately 1 million acre feet of water south through the Everglades. Redirecting this additional flow through the Everglades will require up to an additional 45,000 acres for stormwater treatment as well as land for flowways/conveyance to maximize the natural connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.
- Consider land swaps of up to 30,000 acres in the Kissimmee Basin to implement the Northern Everglades Plan and projects to improve Lake Okeechobee water quality.

2. The State should work closely with the Federal government to set forth appropriate priorities based on the new availability of critical lands. Both governments should place an immediate focus on eliminating barriers to sheet-flow that currently prevent any treated and stored water from moving south.

3. The State of Florida should commit to providing resources and meaningful support to the local communities in order to sustain economic viability within these communities.

4. Conservation easements to promote the creation and/or maintenance of sustainable agriculture or restoration uses should be placed on all agricultural land conveyed or swapped by the state. Development rights on land acquired by the state should not be traded or sold to facilitate development elsewhere.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Federal and state governments look to re-evaluate restoration priorities in light of the opportunities that acquisition of additional land in the EAA presents, the Everglades Coalition recommends that the following are considered:

1. The Federal and State partnership must be re-invigorated. With a renewed investment from the State of Florida, it is critical that the Federal government sustain its commitment to restoring America's Everglades. Strategies must be developed to keep the remainder of CERP and other restoration efforts on track.
2. Project development for restoration plans in the EAA should be conducted in an open, fully transparent process to allow for full engagement by all interested stakeholders.
3. Implement a plan for full removal of barriers to sheet-flow in Water Conservation Area 3 and Everglades National Park. Removing levees and canals in the WCAs, the existing Tamiami Trail, and implementing seepage control along the eastern border of the Everglades will allow a natural drying pattern that would result in the greatest benefit to the Everglades. Any additional storage created will be useless to the Everglades without removing these barriers to flow.
4. The State of Florida should initiate the process for designation of the EAA as an Area of Critical State Concern.
5. Regarding proposals for an inland port facility, no action should be taken by local, state or federal agencies

to process permits or comprehensive plan amendments regarding the location of such a facility until such time as the land purchases from U.S. Sugar and associated land swaps are completed and appropriate revisions are made to the CERP.

6. Local government must share responsibility for Everglades restoration through planning decisions and must prevent development that undermines protection and restoration of the greater Everglades ecosystem. As restoration plans for the EAA are developed, local governments should:

- Promote sustainable agriculture within the EAA and prevent conversion of agricultural land to uses that are incompatible with restoration, which, among other things, can include mining, landfills, major roadways, rail lines, power plants, institutional and civic uses.
- Institute a moratorium on any land use changes, re-zonings, conditional use approvals or other approvals for development, mining or other changes in use within the EAA until restoration plans are fully developed.

Permanently prohibit development or land uses within the EAA which are incompatible with or which may impair restoration of the Everglades.

- Prevent fragmentation of habitat or potential locations of restoration-related uses by new roads, infrastructure, or development.
- Within the municipal boundaries of the Glades Communities, promote sustainable economic development that is compatible with and/or enhances restoration; prohibit uses that are incompatible with restoration objectives.
- Maintain compact urban growth patterns within existing population centers of Glades communities to keep land remaining in the EAA available for agriculture and land uses that facilitate Everglades restoration. Prevent development on agricultural lands outside of municipal boundaries. Amend Comprehensive Plans and land development regulations to include incentive programs to facilitate urban infill development patterns while discouraging sprawl.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT





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PLANNING STRATEGIES FOR THE EVERGLADES AGRICULTURAL AREA



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