

# Everglades re-flow

Who really will benefit?



## Treasure Coast to lead projects

Story and photograph by Dan McCue  
of the News staff

**R**eadying his boat for launch from a dock on the Indian River Lagoon, Dan McCarthy looked across the sun-dappled waters and considered the fate of the Everglades.

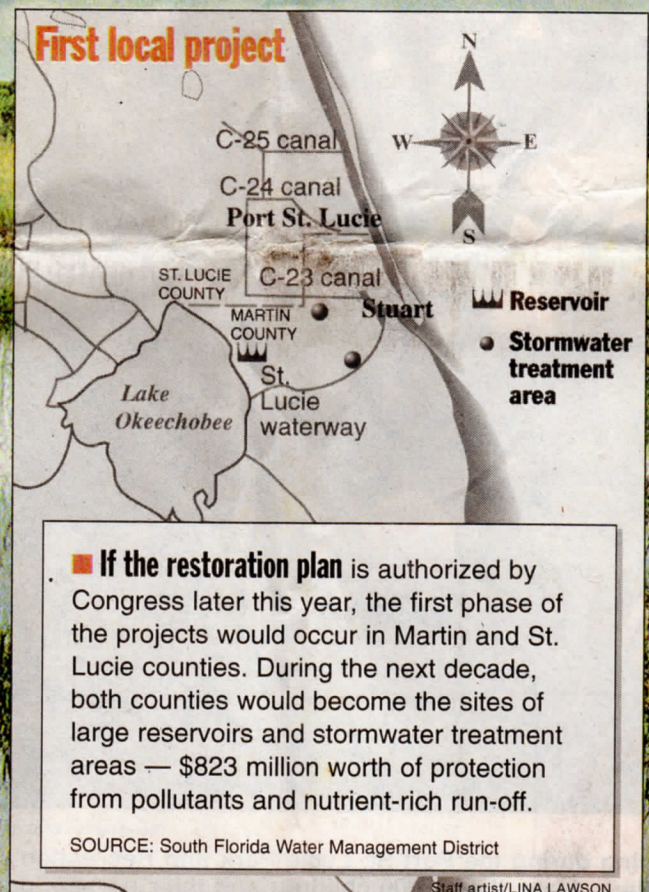
"You think about the restoration plan every time the water around here gets all nasty," said McCarthy, who has been fishing the lagoon for 10 years.

"As I understand it, they're going to try to get things back to the way it was naturally. Anything that will keep more bad water from pouring into our local waterways, I'm all for."

But as water managers begin to offer more details about the massive Everglades restoration effort and state and federal governments inch closer to authorizing money to pay for it, local environmentalists are getting worried.

Will the restoration, the most ambitious environmental reparation project ever undertaken in this country, deliver its promised benefits, they wonder. Or is it just a massive public works project that will benefit agricultural and development interests most?

Under current budget projections, almost \$8 billion dollars is to be spent during the next 20 years to restore the Everglades and the extensive South Florida watershed that drains into the







■ **Water once freely flowed** from the southern rim of Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades to Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.



■ **Today**, the Everglades have been severed by canals and levees.



■ **In the next 20 years**, the Restudy would restore much of the remaining Everglades to a free-flowing system.

# Treasure Coast to lead projects

**Story and photograph by Dan McCue**  
*of the News staff*

**R**eadying his boat for launch from a dock on the Indian River Lagoon, Dan McCarthy looked across the sun-dappled waters and considered the fate of the Everglades.

"You think about the restoration plan every time the water around here gets all nasty," said McCarthy, who has been fishing the lagoon for 10 years.

"As I understand it, they're going to try to get things back to the way it was naturally. Anything that will keep more bad water from pouring into our local waterways, I'm all for."

But as water managers begin to offer more details about the massive Everglades restoration effort and state and federal governments inch closer to authorizing money to pay for it, local environmentalists are getting worried.

Will the restoration, the most ambitious environmental reparation project ever undertaken in this country, deliver its promised benefits, they wonder. Or is it just a massive public works project that will benefit agricultural and development interests most?

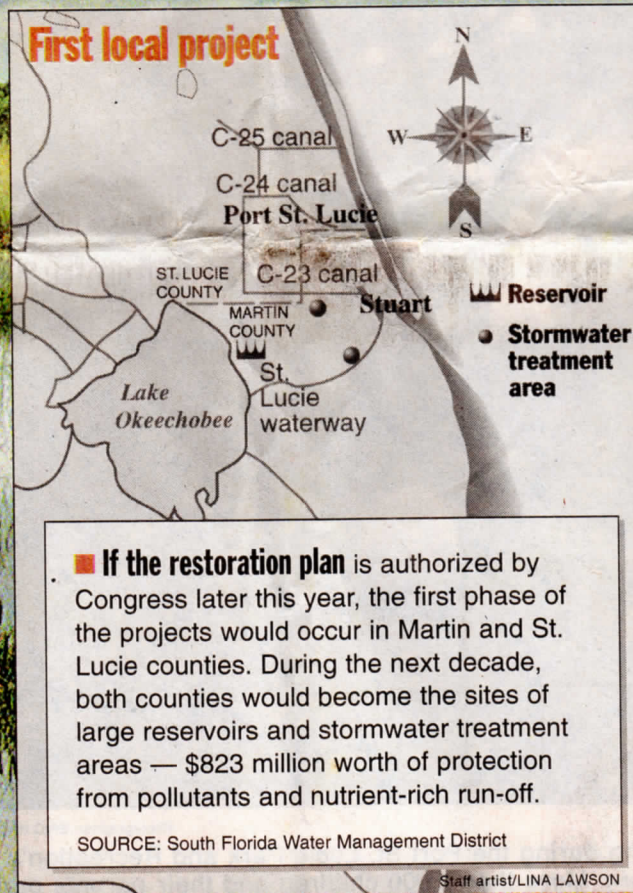
Under current budget projections, almost \$8 billion dollars is to be spent during the next 20 years to restore the Everglades and the extensive South Florida watershed that drains into the 'Glades.

In Martin and St. Lucie counties, expenditures during the next decade, the time it will take to complete the first phase of the complicated project, will total \$823 million.

"The concern we have is seeing the money being dedicated to this spent wisely and effectively," said Kevin Henderson, vice president of the St. Lucie River Initiative, a Stuart-based group that lobbied to ensure Martin County's projects would be among the first undertaken.

"Unfortunately, the closer we get to the start of the project, the more questions we have about that."

Nathaniel Reed, a Jupiter Island resident and former under-secretary of the Interior Department during the Nixon and Ford administrations, is among those who think it's also critical to "fix" Lake Okeechobee if meaningful ecosystem restora-





# GLADES

■ CONTINUED FROM B1

tion in Florida is ever to be achieved.

"Lake Okeechobee is sicker than any other part of the Everglades system," Reed said. "It's full of pee. It's full of manure. And until the lake is treated differently, its level brought down to a more manageable level, the entire system will suffer whenever water is released from it."

As the Everglades plan reaches a critical stage in the Legislature and in Congress, questions are building on funding for the project.

"If we don't get authorization from this year, the prevailing belief is all the players will start tearing at each other and it will all be over," said Maggy Hurchalla, a former Martin County Commissioner.

Under a tentative agreement expected to be made formal early in the summer, the state would commit \$200 million a year to the project for 20 years, and the federal government would match that figure each year.

Gov. Jeb Bush's plan, now being considered by state legislators, calls for the state's annual share to be split in half, with the state paying \$100 million and the local sponsor, the South Florida Water Management District, paying the other \$100 million.

Bush's plan would spend money from the state's general fund and be supplemented by about \$50 million from the state's two conservation land programs. The water district has to date identified \$85 million for its share, mainly by cutting back on existing programs in its \$470 million annual budget.

J. Allison Defoor, the governor's Everglades policy coordinator, predicted a final version of the state's funding plan should be in place in two weeks.

"Then it's going to be Washington's turn and, let me tell you, there's still a lot of work to do," he said.

Whatever people's concerns are about the details of the plan, Defoor said, all eyes should be kept on protecting the Everglades and South Florida's lakes and estuaries, which are among the state's most recognizable and bankable natural resources.

"This isn't about hugging trees, this is about the economic future of South Florida as much as anything else," Defoor said.

"And let me say this: Another 12 years without this program and you are going to have 6 million people fighting over water. What happens then is that the 6 million thirsty people will get the water, and the environment will come last."

## Problems' origins

After a century of aggressive manipulation of South Florida's water supply, evidence that human hands have altered the environment is everywhere.

Among its most local manifestations are lesioned fish and sea turtles and declining sea grass beds — the basis of almost all life in estuaries.

The seeds of local problems were planted as long ago as 1916, when construction began on the C-44 canal, also known as the St. Lucie Waterway. The canal pierced the Atlantic Ridge — a natural berm that separated coastal and inland habitats — linked Lake Okeechobee with the St. Lucie River and forever altered the balance of fresh and salt water on the Treasure Coast.

The purpose of the C-44 is to provide an outlet for water that accumulates in the lake during and after hurricane season.

Three more canals, the C-23, C-24 and C-25 in St. Lucie County, were built between 1919 and 1947, solely for flood control and irrigation.

Their net effect was to lower the water table in western Martin and St. Lucie counties by about 4 feet.

Those early canals changed the region, but what pushed the environment to the crisis point was a far-ranging plan designed in the late 1940s and 1950s to protect South Florida's cities from floods and also provide water to the 500,000 people who lived along the Atlantic Coast then.

Environmental advocates and government officials now agree the system, including more than 1,000 miles of canals and 720 miles of levees, has been over-managed.

While the water management system has provided consistent flood protection and a steady supply of fresh water to the state's coastal inhabitants — who now number 6 million in South Florida — the canals, dikes and dams have robbed the Everglades and South Florida's other major water bodies of the natural conditions that nourished them.

"Certainly, something has to be done, and there's no question our fate is tied to the Everglades," said Brian Killday, director of the St. Lucie County Conservation Alliance.

"Right now, water that traditionally flowed into the Shark River Slough, the heart of the Everglades, is being diverted to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers because of the presence of agriculture and development between it and Lake Okeechobee."



Populated areas — the Palm Beaches, Fort Lauderdale, Miami-Dade County — and sugar cane growers and other agricultural interests have come to rely on Lake Okeechobee as a huge reservoir.

When the lake needs to be lowered, as it does now in anticipation of the tropical storm season, some of the water is flushed into the St. Lucie River, sending a surge of nutrients, sediments and other pollutants into the coastal basin.

"It's a vicious cycle," Killday said. "I think what we tend to forget is that South Florida, this place we all love, was once just one big swamp, and by trying to manage it and make it more livable, we've created a whole new set of problems."

### Plan's 3 basics

Regional water managers and state scientists hope they have found a solution — the South Florida Eco-system Restoration Plan.

Its major goals can be summarized in three words: quantity, quality and timing.

"Essentially, the plan is to capture and store more water in Central Florida, where it historically sat," said Paul Millar, director of the Martin/St. Lucie County service center for the South Florida Water Management District.

"In addition, the fresh water that is moved to the coast and to the Everglades will be cleaned up and diverted to where it is needed in a more timely fashion."

Land acquisition and construction of the water control facilities would take most of the initial investment. The Treasure Coast is to be where the first of the restoration's 53 separate elements will be attempted.

The first project is to include building a massive above-ground reservoir with storage capacity of 40,000 acre-feet (about 13 billion gallons) north of the C-44 canal near Lake Okeechobee in western Martin County.

It would be augmented by two stormwater treatment areas — man-made marshes through which run-off would be sent — the entire project covering about 10,000 acres.

A pump at each of the structures would give water managers the ability to control the flow of water to and from the lake between the structures and between the easternmost stormwater treatment areas and the estuary.

The primary purpose is to capture run-off in the canal's basin and reduce damage to the Indian River Lagoon and St. Lucie Estuary. The cost of the project, which would be operational in 2007, is estimated at almost \$113 million.

In St. Lucie County, water managers plan to build two large reservoirs, one with a storage capacity of 39,000 acre-feet (12.8 billion gallons), the other with a capacity of 9,350 acre feet (3 billion gallons), between the forks formed by the C-23, C-24 and C-25 canals.

Like the Martin County project, each of these would be complemented by two stormwater treatment areas.

This project, scheduled to be up and running by 2010, is intended to enhance flood protection in St. Lucie County while reducing the amount of agricultural pollutants flowing into the lagoon and the river. The cost of the project is projected at \$710 million.

Recurring operations and maintenance of the reservoirs, stormwater treatment areas and pumping stations in Martin and St. Lucie counties would cost an estimated \$5.6 million a year.

Similar stormwater treatment areas are under construction in Palm Beach and Broward counties as part of the Everglades Forever Act passed by the Legislature in 1994.

Those marshes, covering 80,000 acres, will be built throughout the Everglades, with an emphasis on the Everglades Agricultural Area, south of Lake Okeechobee, to capture run-off and filter out impurities from sugar cane fields and other farms that proliferate there.

The cost of many of these marshes will be paid by sugar growers and other agricultural interests south of the lake.

More reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas are planned for the Kissimmee River Basin.

"This is a concept we are very comfortable with," said David Unsell, senior supervising engineer on the project for the South Florida Water Management District. "And when I say we, I'm not just talking about the district, but also a host of other agencies that have reviewed it, ranging from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs."

### Martin County funding

Helping to put the Treasure Coast's projects on the fast track is Martin County's One Cent Sales Tax initiative for Healthy Rivers and Natural Resource Protection.

Already in receipt of about \$14 million, the county expects to collect more than \$44 million before the tax ends Dec. 31, 2001, said Deputy County Administrator Dan Hudson.



A total of \$22 million raised through the tax will be allocated for the acquisition of lands identified in the restudy for river restoration, \$18 million to provide matching funds for land for conservation and protection of natural resources and \$2 million to provide municipal capital projects.

"So far, Martin County is the only South Florida county to both endorse the plan and identify a source for the local match," Unsell said. "That's what's made this area a priority."

St. Lucie County moved up the priority list not just because it shares a critical canal with Martin County, the C-23, but also because of its active approach to seeking state and federal matching money for local projects in partnership with the St. Lucie River Issue Team, a clearinghouse for local environmental restoration funding.

Although he strongly advocates the overall plan, Unsell conceded the heavy reliance on reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas is not something everybody is going to be happy with.

"You have to remember there are two distinct sources of water troubling the estuary," he said. "One is the run-off, the rainfall that accumulates in the basin every year and keeps the estuary in chronic ill health."

"This project directly addresses this key issue," Unsell said. "Using this method, we anticipate reducing pollutants flowing into the estuary by 47 percent."

"The other thing troubling the estuary are the large volumes of fresh water that have been released from the lake itself from time to time," he said. "Our plan will not be very effective in solving that problem."

## Support, concerns

Although no one involved in the project says it is flawless, there are hopes it will provide at least some of its promised improvements to the local ecosystem.

"I think the plan is ambitious and it looks like it will work," said Gil Kennedy, a member of the resident-based St. Lucie County Restudy Committee.

"We need a lot of filter areas and I think they are taking a pretty aggressive and constructive attitude toward that."

"At the same time, I don't see this as a culmination of any kind. It's just part of a very long job. Resolving these issues is going to take a lot of cooperation from a lot of people for a long, long time."

Others have concerns about the plan.

"There are a couple of problems with what's being proposed," said Henderson of the St. Lucie River Initiative. "First, they're talking about one of the stormwater treatment areas cleansing the water and then pumping the clean water back into Lake Okeechobee."

"Those who want to see the lake continue to be reservoir are fine with that, but it still leaves us here in Martin County under the threat of a massive dump from the lake when a hurricane passes through."

"Another thing is the location of the stormwater treatment area. The further it moves west, the less benefit it will be to the estuary, particularly when you consider all of the agricultural interests who will be drawing the clean water from it before it ever gets to us."

Henderson also suggests the water district has placed too much emphasis on one basin, the C-44, while ignoring smaller watersheds in the county, including those that empty into the South Fork of the St. Lucie River.

"We don't want this one big project done and then for them to say, 'Sorry, no money for the other local areas that need it,'" Henderson said.

Millar, of the water district, said that is exactly what is happening.

"This is the basin enchilada, if you will," Millar said. "This is the best attempt we've ever made to balance the competing needs of urban development, agriculture and the environment."

"We got into this mess by looking only at flood control and water supply needs," he said. "To put blinders on now and look only at the environment at a time when 6.5 million people live in the region, stretching from Orlando to

# EVERGLADES

■ CONTINUED FROM B6

Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society, also thinks the plan as outlined falls short of its goals.

"What's going to happen is instead of having just the lake being used as a reservoir, the entire basin, C-44 canal and all, will become the reservoir," he said.

"While I support the overall plan and think many elements of it are good — like the removal of some drainage canals in the Miami area — I think these construction components are less good.

"I guess my problem is that it seems like they're saying, 'Let's keep supplying water for agriculture and urban users, keep the overall drainage plan in place, and let's just add on saving the Everglades.'

"I don't think these goals can co-exist. I don't think those goals go together. You have to start sacrificing something somewhere. Personally, I believe you are going to have to sacrifice some of the uses of the land that's been used as agriculture."

Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, a senior vice president with U.S. Sugar and a member of the Governor's Commission on a Sustainable South Florida, disagrees with that suggestion.

"What the commission found was that you can't separate out elements of the plan," Wade said. "You can't say one element was water supply, one was water quality, one was flood control. There are combinations of all those things in each project.

"One might look like it's supplying water, but it's helping the lake because it takes down the level of the lake and the storage

the lake is used for currently."

When all is said and done, Lake Okeechobee still will be a reservoir, Wade acknowledged.

"It will, but I think one of the intents of this effort is for the lake to be regulated by whatever somebody determines is best for it environmentally," he said.

"Once the other storage components are in place, that will take the pressure off using the lake as a storage reservoir. But in the interim, before you have all those things, you have to face it. . . . Lake Okeechobee is our lifeblood in terms of being the storage reservoir for all of South Florida."



## Dining Guide

Serving up the  
Best Restaurants  
Every Thursday  
and Friday.



**The News**

To Subscribe call 561-221-4160  
To Advertise call 561-287-1550

Also check it out on  
our website [TCPalm.com](http://TCPalm.com)

