



The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is a regional governmental agency that oversees the water resources in 16 counties – from Orlando to the Florida Keys.

## OUR MISSION

To **SAFEGUARD** and **RESTORE** South Florida's water resources and ecosystems, **PROTECT** our communities from flooding, and **MEET** the region's water needs while **CONNECTING** with the public and stakeholders

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# The Corkscrew Watershed Initiative (CWI)

## *Ecological Restoration of the Corkscrew System*



Pine and Marsh

### Project Overview

The Corkscrew Watershed Initiative project is a three-year planning study that began in March 2024 and encompasses a large portion of the approximately 60,000-70,000 acre Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW), the largest intact watershed in Southwest Florida.

Located in northern Collier County, southern Lee County and a portion of southwest Hendry County, the project objectives are to develop a comprehensive strategy to achieve ecological restoration of the Corkscrew system by improving wetland hydrology and natural flows, while reducing flood risks and maintaining regional water availability.

### Corkscrew Watershed

The Corkscrew Watershed contains vital natural resources that are important locally, nationally and internationally. It contains a wide variety of native habitats that are home to many plant and animal species such as the rare and endangered ghost orchid, the endangered Florida panther and snail kite and wading birds such as the wood stork.

These natural areas provide a critical wildlife corridor for Florida panthers and other species by forming a connected network of protected areas, including the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Picayune Strand State Forest, Collier-Seminole State Park, Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Big Cypress National Preserve, the Green Heart of the Everglades and Everglades National Park.

In addition to protecting natural plant and animal communities, the Corkscrew system provides natural flood protection, water purification and aquifer recharge, as well as opportunities for public recreation and environmental education.



Florida Panther

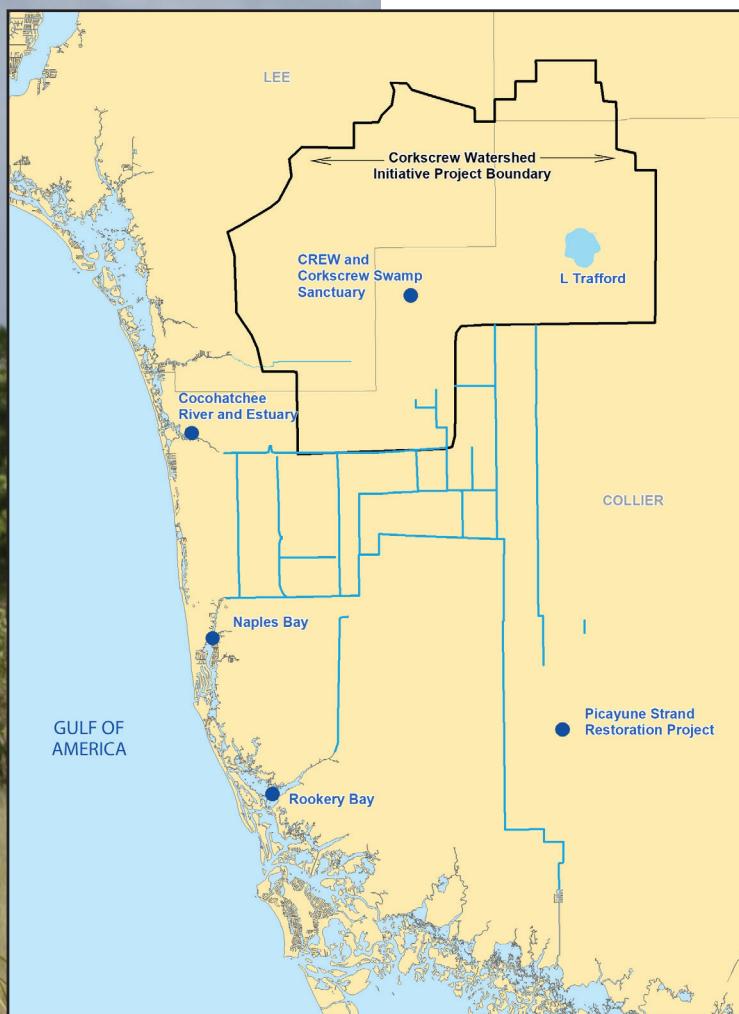


Great Blue Heron



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### Project History

Previous studies and monitoring information have documented reduced hydroperiods and increased water level recession rates throughout the dry season in the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary within the last 60 years. This study builds upon previous efforts to determine potential causes of the shortened hydroperiods and reduced dry season water levels that have been documented at the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Impacts observed within the Sanctuary include a dramatic decline in the population of nesting wood storks, as well as altered succession of marsh plant communities, which became overgrown with shrub and tree species.



Wood Storks

Other risks to the ecosystem from reduced water levels include increased risk of catastrophic fire, reduced freshwater storage, and altered timing and quantity of freshwater flow to downstream estuaries. Improving ecosystem hydrology helps provide a more resilient future for both the natural communities and surrounding urban areas.

### Technical Working Group participants include:

- ▶ City of Bonita Springs
- ▶ Collier County
- ▶ Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary
- ▶ CREW Land & Water Trust
- ▶ Lee County
- ▶ South Florida Water Management District
- ▶ Village of Estero

### Project Background

The Technical Working Group, a planning team comprised of South Florida Water Management District staff, representatives of local governments in the region and others with responsibility for the management of the Corkscrew Watershed have gathered data and identified viable short and long-term projects to achieve the Corkscrew Watershed Initiative objectives.

The project is currently in the alternatives evaluation phase. Performance measures, metrics and state-of-the-art modeling are being used to evaluate the proposed restoration projects, to identify the final proposed solutions. The planning initiative includes stakeholder and public involvement, with a final report to be provided in 2026.

The team has also identified early implementation projects that can be expedited and advanced concurrently with the Corkscrew Watershed Initiative planning process and will support achieving the project objectives. Examples include land acquisition of ecologically important parcels by local government agencies in the region and the Larry Kiker Preserve project being implemented by Lee County. The latter is a major flood control and environmental restoration project encompassing over 3,900 acres within CREW for which Lee County received a resiliency grant and expects to be completed by 2029.