



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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SFWMD to Join and Support Indian River Lagoon Council

The council will direct an expanded National Estuary Program to protect the lagoon

West Palm Beach, FL – The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board this week approved entering into an interlocal agreement that expands protection efforts and opportunities under the Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program (IRL NEP) and creates the Indian River Lagoon Council to lead the work.

In the coming weeks, the agreement is set to go before each of the partners anticipated to comprise the new IRL Council: Volusia, Brevard, Indian River and St. Lucie counties; Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP); and the St. Johns River Water Management District. Martin County, also a partner, approved the agreement at its January 13 Board of County Commissioners meeting.

“This reinvigorated effort promises to expand protection for a unique and incredibly important waterway,” said SFWMD Governing Board Vice Chair Kevin Powers, a long-time resident of Martin County. “I’m confident that the dedicated partners on the new IRL Council will help direct the increased resources in the most beneficial manner for the lagoon.”

The action follows a 2014 funding commitment of \$500,000 by the South Florida and the St. Johns River water management districts, plus \$250,000 from DEP, to expand the IRL NEP program and its projects. Pending their approval, the five counties along the lagoon will each invest \$50,000 toward the program.

The IRL NEP was established in 1990 through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) designation of the IRL as an “estuary of national significance.” The program provides a non-regulatory, stakeholder-driven, collaborative approach to coastal watershed restoration and protection. Prior to this expansion, the St. Johns River Water Management District provided funding and administrative oversight for the program. EPA reviewed the interlocal agreement and has expressed support for its adoption.

The expanded IRL NEP is designed to increase community participation and expand project opportunities. These enhancements include:

- Reigniting community engagement
- Targeting the IRL for increased project funding at local, state and federal levels
- Highlighting the importance of the IRL through outreach and education

About the Indian River Lagoon

The IRL is a diverse, shallow-water estuary stretching across 40 percent of Florida's east coast from Ponce de Leon Inlet in Volusia County to the southern boundary of Martin County. The lagoon is a critical water body in the state and has experienced excess nutrient pollution in addition to excess freshwater flows for many decades. Widespread algal blooms appeared in the lagoon in 2011 followed by brown tide blooms in 2012 and 2013. Approximately 47,000 acres of seagrasses were lost, a reduction of about 60 percent of the lagoon's total seagrass coverage.

The lagoon supports a multitude of industries and activities, from fishing and recreation to tourism and agriculture. A study concluded that the economic benefits of the Indian River Lagoon totaled more than \$3.7 billion in 2007 alone and accounts for 15,000 jobs.

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About the South Florida Water Management District

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.