



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Picayune Pump Station Delivers First Gallons of Water for Restoration** *SFWMD also starts work to protect the local manatee population*



*The new Merritt Pump Station began delivering water in June. Restoration efforts will include a new refuge for manatees. (Manatee photo courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Click on the pictures for larger versions.)*

**Naples, FL** — Rising out of the flat Everglades landscape in southwest Florida, a massive new pump station has begun sending the first gallons of water to help restore 55,000 acres in the Picayune Strand. Restoration of this area is a joint effort between the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

“Sending water into an area that was left dry and unnatural by long-gone development is another sign of our restoration progress,” said SFWMD Executive Director Blake Guillory. “Work in the Picayune Strand has been an ongoing partnership that is producing visible results.”

The Merritt Pump Station, officially designated as S-488, is the first of three pump stations to be completed for restoring Picayune wetlands and wildlife habitat and also to improve the health of downstream estuaries in the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

The pump station, located in Collier County’s Big Cypress Basin, was completed by the Army Corps in September. It can pump 810 cubic feet of water per second to provide

both flood control for communities north of Picayune and sheetflow south needed for environmental restoration.

Work to allow this sheetflow of water to move south across a broad expanse of the landscape was completed in 2006, when numerous culverts were constructed under U.S. 41 to allow water movement.

"The Picayune Strand Restoration Project continues to serve as an example of what can be accomplished when we work together," said Col. Alan Dodd, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District Commander. "In October, the Corps and our partners at the South Florida Water Management District celebrated the completion of the Merritt Pump Station. Now, we are seeing restoration in action."



*Strategically located culverts, a portion of them shown in red, help move water under U.S. 41 to allow it to spread out and rehydrate wetlands. (Click on the map for a larger version.)*

Additionally, work to plug 10 miles of the Merritt Canal was completed this month, spreading water across the landscape, rehydrating the area south of Interstate 75 and north of U.S. 41, between the Belle Meade area and the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

Scientists expect to see beneficial changes in local vegetation and wildlife habitat begin to emerge as early as this year.

### **Manatee Protection**

Approximately 300 manatees currently use the Port of the Islands Basin as a warm water refuge during the colder months of the year. Scientists believe this refuge was created by freshwater discharged from the current canal system in Picayune Strand.

Unfortunately, restoration efforts that will enhance wildlife habitat in the region will reduce freshwater flow into this specific area.

In April, the SFWMD approved a contract to construct a new manatee refuge that is compatible with restoration efforts. Work will include creation of three deep pools, 100 feet in diameter and about 20 feet deep. Construction of the refuge began on June 25 with clearing of the site, and work is scheduled to be complete in April 2016.

### **Picayune Strand Background and Restoration Goals**

Southern Golden Gate Estates was originally designed and marketed as the largest suburban development in the country in the late 1960's. The developer dredged 48 miles of canals, built approximately 270 miles of shell-rock roads and sold thousands of lots before going bankrupt.

Florida and its federal partners set out to restore the region to a more natural state. The objective is to restore and enhance wetlands in Picayune Strand and adjacent public lands by reducing over-drainage, and to improve the water quality of coastal estuaries by moderating the large salinity fluctuations caused by point discharge of freshwater from the Faka Union Canal.

Authorized by Congress in 2007, the Picayune Strand Restoration Project became the first Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan project to begin construction.

Restoration will help connect publically owned and protected lands in the area, including:

- Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve ~75,000 acres
- Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge ~26,000 acres
- Collier-Seminole State Park ~6,500 acres
- Big Cypress National Preserve ~730,000 acres
- Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge ~35,000 acres

### **Completed Restoration Work**

To date, the Picayune Strand Restoration Project has reached several milestones, including:

- Prairie Canal Plugging and Road Removal (SFWMD): This included backfilling and plugging 7 miles of the Prairie Canal using fill from spoil along the canal and removing 65 miles of roads to restore the natural historical grade.
- Tamiami Trail Culvert Construction (SFWMD): Work included installation of 9 culverts under the Tamiami Trail to help restore overland flows in the Picayune Strand.
- Merritt Pump Station and Road Removal (USACE): Pump Station construction started in February 2010 and was completed in September 2014. Work included plugging 10 miles of the Merritt Canal.

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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.*