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Wildlife safety concerns could boost costs of Everglades reservoirs	01/30/2010	Sun Sentinel - Online	
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Wildlife safety concerns could boost costs of Everglades reservoirs

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01/30/2010

Sun Sentinel - Online

Reservoirs planned to help restore the Everglades might need costly redesigns to avoid trapping and killing wildlife drawn to the vast pools of water.

Making the proposed reservoirs' embankments more animal-friendly could add to the cost ? by \$50 million for just one reservoir ? of long-delayed water storage considered vital to reviving parts of the Everglades.

South Florida water managers contend the proposed changes could save taxpayers money in the long run, but the up-front costs would add yet another hurdle to Everglades restoration.

It is "insane" to let concerns about potential wildlife deaths within the reservoirs add to the costs, and potential delays, of water-storage structures intended to save dwindling animal habitat in the Everglades, said Michael Collins, a member of the South Florida Water Management District board.

"We have totally lost our focus," Collins said. "If we have got to take care of every field mouse, we are never going to get there."

Multibillion-dollar restoration plans call for a series of reservoirs and stormwater-treatment areas that could recreate southward water flows from Lake Okeechobee.

Wildlife officials say the proposed stair-step design for the interior of the more than 30-foot-tall reservoir embankments could end up stranding turtles and fledgling wading birds that wander up there.

Administrators at the South Florida Water Management District, which leads Everglades restoration, contend they could change to a smoother design without significant delays. That would add about 10 percent to the cost of each reservoir, according to the district.

For the proposed 11,000-acre C-43 reservoir, which would store water west of Lake Okeechobee, the embankment design changes would add about \$50 million to the \$500 million estimated construction cost.

At least two other major reservoirs are planned south and east of Lake Okeechobee.

Paying more now would prevent having to pay for costly fixes later if animal die-offs become a problem, according to district administrators who supported making the change.

Changing the design also could save the agency millions in annual costs to monitor the reservoirs' effects on wildlife, according to the district.

Those monitoring costs, required by state and federal agencies, could otherwise amount to more than \$5 million a year just for the reservoir planned west of Lake Okeechobee, said district Executive Director Carol Wehle.

It would be proactive to make the change now, said district board member Shannon Estenoz.

Yet during an economic downturn with more government budget cuts coming, adding millions in construction costs would be a new, frustrating hurdle to long-stalled restoration efforts.

"We have to move forward. We got to get this stuff built," said board member Jerry Montgomery.

South Florida taxpayers already are shouldering steep costs for an unfinished reservoir in western Palm Beach County. The district in 2008 stopped work on the 16,700-acre project after taxpayers had invested \$250 million in the reservoir west of U.S. 27.

District officials initially blamed an environmental lawsuit when they stopped construction.

But a few weeks later, they announced plans for a land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. that would change the face of Everglades restoration. The pending deal could move the water storage needs farther west and result in the unfinished reservoir being turned into a stormwater treatment area.

As for potential changes to the C-43 reservoir, district board member Charles Dauray warned that protecting wildlife "by any means possible" could end up in more delays that paralyze restoration.

The district this year still faces the daunting task of getting Congress to authorize moving ahead with the C-43 reservoir.

"Reason seems to have gone by the wayside," Dauray said.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

New Everglades Hurdle Reservoir Redesign

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digital wire

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INFORMATIONAL BOX:

What embankment design

changes would add to the cost of the proposed \$500 million, 11,000-acre C-43 reservoir. \$50M

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