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What the Everglades needs

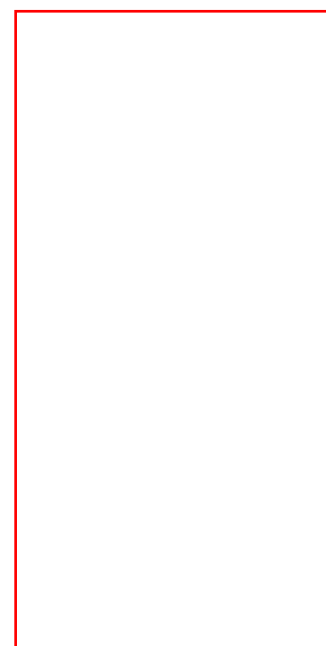
Palm Beach Post Editorial

Friday, October 31, 2008

The latest update on Everglades restoration contained nothing new, which should make the issue a priority for the state's new congressional delegation.

As part of the restoration plan Congress passed in 2000, the National Academy of Sciences issues regular assessments of the program. The group concluded, to no one's surprise, that there has been "scant progress" and called for "strong political leadership." In the meantime, Everglades "ecosystems continue to decline" for lack of water at the right time. One example is the famous "tree islands" of the Everglades. They are considered "biodiversity hot spots," and the islands are suffering.

The explanation for the delay is simple. Restoration was supposed to be a 50-50 deal - Florida buys the land, Washington pays for the 68 projects to store and cleanse water that now flows out to sea. Only the state has held up its end of the deal. In a letter to the academy, Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole and South Florida Water Management Director Carol Wehle note that the state has bought nearly 60 percent of the land. Not until last year, however, did Congress approve a water bill that authorized some of the restoration projects. Congress still would have to approve money for those





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better job of cleaning water that flows into Lake Okeechobee from the north. But on the Everglades restoration plan that is almost a decade old, this state doesn't have to apologize. Indeed, Florida is doing some of the projects on the federal list, just to keep momentum from stalling. A reinvented Florida depends on a restored Everglades, which depends on a committed Congress.

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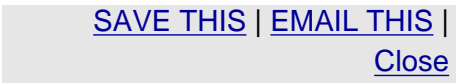
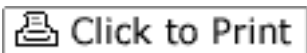
Mr. Sole and Ms. Wehle took four pages to summarize how much Florida has done and how little Washington has done.

As bad as the delay of money since 2000 has been, it gets worse. Twenty years ago, the federal government agreed to raise U.S. 41, which runs through the southern Everglades from Miami to the Gulf Coast. That would uncork the bottom of the Everglades system and allow water to flow south. It hasn't happened. The academy blames "parochial interests, litigation, cost escalation, engineering constraints and a lack of coordinated leadership."

There's that I-word again. In January, there will be a new president, a new Congress and an Everglades restoration that the state can't keep running alone. Admittedly, Florida has to do a better job of cleaning water that flows into Lake Okeechobee from the north. But on the Everglades restoration plan that is almost a decade old, this state doesn't have to apologize. Indeed, Florida is doing some of the projects on the federal list, just to keep momentum from stalling. A reinvented Florida depends on a restored Everglades, which depends on a committed Congress.

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