

The Miami Herald

Posted on Fri, Aug. 07, 2009

Time's running short for Everglades and Florida Bay

Florida Bay is one of the most tranquil places in the Sunshine State. And in a state that boasts multiple sparkling bays dotted with idyllic islands, great pine forests where eagles nest, vast swamps teeming with life and tobacco-tinted rivers with lazy currents and gentle banks, that's saying something.

Fed by water from the Everglades, the Bay is a magical mix of salt and fresh water in an estuary that nurtures shrimp, lobster, bonefish and other marine species in its platinum-colored shallows. But the fate of Florida Bay is inextricably tied to that of the Everglades, and until recently, neither of their futures looked very hopeful despite years of promises to fix the great River of Grass and its southern neighbor.

Today, the Bay is choked by algae blooms, polluted by runoff from urban sprawl and agriculture and clogged by dying sea grass that once filtered the water and sheltered marine life. Its ecosystem is collapsing. When the Bay goes so does a big chunk of the state's lucrative commercial and recreational fisheries, along with a slice of the tourism industry.

Federal funding blocked

Two decisions this month by the South Florida Water Management District's governing board can begin to stem the Bay's collapse. The board should approve an agreement between the district and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on how they will calculate costs and share responsibilities for projects to replumb the Everglades to bring more clean water into the national park and Florida Bay. Approval will clear a huge obstacle that has blocked federal funding for the massive replumbing project for eight years.

In 2000, Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, an ambitious 20-year project to restore the Everglades' sheet flow while safeguarding South Florida's drinking-water supply. CERP is jointly funded by Florida and the federal government. But a mixture of bureaucratic infighting, a plethora of lawsuits by various groups and political shenanigans by the Florida Legislature that angered Congress has held up federal funding.

Meanwhile, the state invested millions of dollars in building water storage reservoirs and buying land for the replumbing project. The logjam finally broke this year when the Obama administration included \$279 million for Glades restoration in the federal stimulus bill. But then a dispute erupted between the feds and the district over how to calculate shared costs. The agreement the district's board of governors will take up Aug. 13 resolves that dispute. Once the board approves it, the first federal stimulus money -- \$41 million to reclaim 55,000 acres in the Picayune Strand in Southwest Florida -- will be freed up.

Awaiting court ruling

The second decision involving the district's board is a vote to spend \$536 million to buy 283,000

acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for the restoration. But first, a judge is expected to rule Friday on a lawsuit brought by the Miccosukee Tribe and others challenging the financing of the land deal. The tribe has concerns that this land purchase might cost taxpayers too much and not leave enough money to pay for other restoration projects.

The tribe's concerns are well taken, as are other issues such as the impact on communities dependent on the sugar industry. But they are overridden by this one-time opportunity to take nearly 300,000 acres out of sugar production. Those acres would become water storage areas that would cut the problematic fresh-water discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers, reduce back-pumping of dirty water into Lake Okeechobee and prevent tons of phosphorus from entering the Glades. Gov. Charlie Crist, who engineered the deal, has added economic incentives and other aid for workers losing jobs once the land is out of commission, which wouldn't happen for several years.

If the judge rules against the district, the board should seek other funding for the land purchase. Time is running short for the Everglades and Florida Bay. Years of unkept promises are strangling these ecosystems. It's time for action, or else the marvelous tranquility of the Bay's placid waters will take on an ominous interpretation. It will be the stillness of death.

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>