

Letter: Everglades restoration project will benefit valuable ecosystems

By TCPalm Staff

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In December the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District approved going forward with the purchase of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar farmland south of Lake Okeechobee. The purpose is to revive the River of Grass that historically connected the flow of water from the lake to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

This was a bold step, taking advantage of a one-time opportunity to buy back some of the 700,000 acres of the Everglades Agricultural Area created in the 1930s after the Herbert Hoover Dike was built around Lake Okeechobee.

Florida Oceanographic has advocated this position since 2000 when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was signed.

The U.S. Sugar farmland purchase is scheduled to close in September. The land will be leased back to farming for the next seven years, allowing a transition for Glades communities and time for project plans and implementation to occur.

We have been working on this issue for awhile and, most recently, attended the first restoration project planning workshop held in Clewiston Jan. 22 to begin the design of the River of Grass connection.

The outlet of water flowing south from Lake Okeechobee will eliminate the damaging discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee River estuaries. The restoration of flowing water south also will help the Everglades and prevent the wasting of more than 620 billion gallons of fresh water each year that now goes to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico — water that we need for drinking and irrigation.

This is a complex effort, but our hope is that we can work out the details and truly restore the health of the Everglades while saving the coastal estuaries.

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