



WATER HAS DEFINED THE CHARACTER OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA LANDSCAPE. The Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades system is one of the largest, most complex natural ecosystems in the world. It nourishes a wide diversity of vegetation and wildlife and contributes to the overall quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

Historically, subtropical weather extremes of flood and drought – combined with a basically flat terrain – determined how many, and where, people would live in south Florida. Natural water flow began in the Upper Chain of Lakes, moved gradually through the twists and curves of the Kissimmee River and over surrounding flood plains, and eventually emptied into Lake Okeechobee. The lake is a huge, geologic indentation – a 730-square-mile shallow bowl. Water would sometimes flow over the southern rim and continue its journey through the sawgrass marshes of the Everglades. Some water was lost through evaporation, while some was captured for later use as it filtered down into the underground aquifers. Water also flowed east or west to the estuaries of the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico. Some flowed south to the tip of the peninsula and into Florida Bay.

But large-scale changes to the landscape and advances in engineering and technology have since allowed population growth and development to flourish. An interconnected network of canals, levees, structures and storage areas was constructed for regional flood control and water supply purposes. Drainage of the rich muck soil south of Lake Okeechobee provided farming opportunities in the highly productive Everglades Agricultural Area. Significant portions of the Everglades ecosystem were preserved through the creation of Water Conservation Areas and Everglades National Park.

Today, more than 16.5 million people call the state home, and nearly 70 million visit each year! Each day approximately 900 more people move to Florida, placing greater demands on existing flood control and water supply systems and impacting the state's natural resources.

The average urban resident in south Florida uses about 175 gallons of water a day. Half of that amount is used to irrigate thirsty lawns. Industry and agriculture also consume millions of gallons each day. If left unchecked, stormwater runoff from growing cities, industries and farms can contaminate fresh water supplies or brackish coastal estuaries and cause changes to the ecological balance of natural areas.

We now understand that no part of an interconnected ecosystem can be changed without impacting other parts or the whole. We also recognize that true "resource protection" applies not only to our natural systems and values, but must include our social and economic values as well.

In collaboration with our various partners, the South Florida Water Management District is working to meet our shared water resource needs for today and for the future.

For more information on our programs and projects, call or write the South Florida Water Management District



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