



Everglades Restoration and the River of Grass Land Acquisition

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The Florida Everglades is a unique network of subtropical wetlands that is now half its original size. The federal government has had a long history of involvement in the Everglades, beginning in the 1940s with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructing flood control projects that shunted water away from the Everglades. Many factors, including these flood control projects and agricultural and urban development, have contributed to the shrinking and altering of the wetlands ecosystem. Federal agencies began ecosystem restoration activities in the Everglades more than 15 years ago, but it was not until 2000 that Congress integrated the majority of restoration activities under an integrated plan, known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP).

The River of Grass acquisition is a proposed land acquisition by the State of Florida, which has the potential to affect the implementation of CERP. The proposal is to purchase tracts of land south of Lake Okeechobee from the U.S. Sugar Corporation. The state argues that the purchase would reduce phosphorus loads and help restore the historic north-south flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. Initially, acquisition of 187,000 acres was announced by Florida Governor Charlie Crist and subsequently approved by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) in December 2008. Since then, the original proposal has been downsized on multiple occasions, both in terms of the size of the purchase and the purchase price. Most recently, a revised land purchase agreement was announced and approved by the SFWMD in August 2010. SFWMD now proposes a direct cash purchase of 26,800 acres, or approximately 14% of the original purchase proposed by the governor in 2008. The purchase would cost SFWMD \$197 million.

Questions have been raised regarding the proposed acquisition. Some of these questions center on potential positive and negative consequences of the land purchase agreement. These include the effectiveness of the land acquisition in reducing nutrient loads that are detrimental to the Everglades and in restoring historic flows, as well as the effect of the initiative's funding requirements on Florida's other restoration projects, including projects with a non-federal cost share requirement under CERP. Since state funding for CERP activities is expected to decline in the coming years, some have questioned whether the proposed funding for the land acquisition deal might be better spent on CERP projects.

The impact of the land acquisition on CERP and other Everglades restoration projects will depend in part on budgetary decisions to be made by the state in late September 2010, which could potentially reduce or delay state funding for some CERP projects. Near-term delays resulting from any funding reductions for CERP projects may be of interest to Congress, as they would affect the overall federal effort to restore the Everglades ecosystem under CERP.

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