



**US Army Corps
of Engineers®**
Jacksonville District

NEWS RELEASE

Release No.: 1001
For Release: Jan. 7, 2010
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Corps kicks-off 2010 with Everglades restoration construction

Agencies celebrate first federally funded CERP project

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. – Federal, state and local officials celebrated a second Everglades historic triumph in as many months; this time by holding a groundbreaking ceremony today for the first Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan project.

The \$53 million federally-funded project includes restoring the Merritt Canal area of the Picayune Strand Restoration Project in Collier County. The project will restore water flow across the landscape, rehydrate drained wetlands, improve estuarine waters, and return habitat to threatened wildlife communities.

Last month, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District and partner agencies broke ground on Tamiami Trail construction, which includes a one-mile bridge and other roadway modifications that will allow increased water flows to Everglades National Park. Both projects benefit the unique Everglades ecosystem.

About 200 local, regional and national level Everglades restoration supporters turned out for the ceremony held along the banks of the Merritt Canal. Speakers included Senator Bill Nelson; Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart; Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality; Tom Strickland, assistant secretary of the Department of Interior; Sam Hamilton, Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Southeast Region; Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works; Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, Mike Sole; the Chairman of the South Florida Water Management District, Eric Buermann; and, James Karels, Florida Division of Forestry director.

“Over the past half-century, south Florida’s explosive growth has absorbed half of the original Everglades. Today, together, we are returning some of those lands that were prepped for development to their former, natural conditions,” said Col. Al Pantano, Corps’ Jacksonville District commander, who presided over the ceremony. Pantano said the Corps made a commitment to restore America’s Everglades, and this first federally-funded CERP project sets the stage for the next decade’s Everglades construction boom.

“For too long, there has been talk of restoring adequate supplies of high quality water to the 10,000 Islands and Everglades National Park,” said the chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. “But with today’s actions, we will be turning that talk into action and taking one of the first, tangible steps to send high quality water where and when it is needed most.” Sutley said the infusion of federal support will trigger progress



on a series of projects that can begin to restore water flow and water quality to the southern reaches of this system.

Nelson and Diaz-Balart also expressed their excitement and commitment, reiterating that the Picayune Strand project was the first in many construction projects to come that will restore America's Everglades.

The Picayune Strand Restoration Project includes 55,000 acres of native Florida wetlands and uplands located between Alligator Alley (Interstate 75) and the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) in the southwestern corner of the state. The ecological condition of the project area affects not only the immediate project, but also significant regional resources. Public lands nearly surround the project area, and include treasures such as the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Collier-Seminole State Park and the Picayune Strand State Forest. The Picayune Strand project area is for southwestern Florida, the critical missing piece of the puzzle.

"Picayune Strand is a crown jewel of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan," said Paul Souza, field supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's South Florida Office. "Restoration of this area is vital to establishing connections between regional habitats, and a host of endangered species that depend on it. Because of leadership shown by our Everglades partnership, we're another step closer to achieving its restoration potential, one step closer to saving our endangered Florida panther, wood stork, manatee and many other species."

Fourteen endangered and nine threatened species are dependent on the unique Everglades ecosystem. The Picayune Strand project will help restore critical habitat such as Cypress strands, wet prairies, pine flatwoods and hardwood hammocks. The project will restore most of the original freshwater wetlands, and will improve estuarine water quality by increasing groundwater recharge and reducing large and unnatural freshwater inflows.

The Merritt Canal portion of the project has several features, including installing 55 plugs in 13.5 miles of the canal which was originally dug to provide flood protection for a later-abandoned residential development. Corps contractors will build an 810-cubic-feet-per-second pump station and spreader canal that will allow natural resource and water managers to direct fresh water to drained wetlands. This will also maintain current flood reduction conditions on land outside the project area. The Corps will oversee the removal of 95 miles of roads and non-native vegetation, which will enhance restoration efforts. The Corps anticipates construction will take about two years to complete.

In 1974, Collier County commissioned the first study to determine how to reverse the impacts of the failed development. In the 1980s, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection began land acquisition that ultimately cost about \$250 million.

To expedite restoration, the SFWMD moved ahead to plug the northern seven miles of the Prairie Canal, remove about 200 miles of roadways adjacent to the canal, and clear exotic plant species from the canal banks. The SFWMD also moved forward with much of the design effort and completed construction on one of four



phases of road removal. This work was completed in 2007. The Merritt Canal component of the restoration project adds to these earlier efforts to reclaim land from the negative effects of human development.

“We congratulate our federal partners at the Corps for their commitment to build on the already successful restoration efforts at the Picayune Strand carried out by the District and the State of Florida,” Buermann said. “When this impressive project is complete, more natural water flow will be restored to vital wetlands and coastal estuaries, helping to protect and support South Florida’s native plants and animals.”

The Merritt Canal contract award includes nearly \$40 million provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that allows full funding of the project, accelerates the construction schedule, and helps create much-needed jobs in southwestern Florida. The Corps’ future award of two additional contracts will nearly complete the restoration of Picayune Strand.

For more information on the Picayune Strand Restoration and other CERP projects, please visit www.evergladesplan.com.

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(Note to Media: For high resolution photos and graphics of the Picayune Strand Project, call Nanciann Regalado at 904-334-8954, or Susan Jackson at 904-232-1953 / (cell) 904-704-6870.