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**HEADLINE: PROPOSED RULES WEAK, GROUPS COMPLAIN;
CITIES, SUGAR FARMS BENEFIT, THEY SAY**

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BODY:

A proposed set of federal rules for implementing the Everglades restoration project came under assault Friday as a weak framework that could help cities and sugar farms rather than the vast wilderness the project was intended to protect.

Representatives of 16 environmental groups signed a letter attacking the rules as "so inadequate as to threaten the future of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan." The letter was released at the annual meeting of the Everglades Coalition in Fort Lauderdale.

And U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, D-Florida, told the coalition that he shared many of their concerns and that they could be aired in Senate hearings. The rules were drafted by the Army Corps of Engineers to guide the implementation of the \$8.4 billion engineering project to replumb the Everglades. The first draft, released last week, dismayed many environmentalists by failing to list specific restoration standards or to set firm rules for allocating water among cities, farms and the Everglades.

Instead, it deferred many decisions to "protocols" that would be written later by the Army Corps, without being subject to the approval of the U.S. Department of the Interior. This is important to environmentalists because they had counted on the Interior Department, as the guardian of the nation's natural lands, to make sure that the water generated by the restoration project went to the Everglades, rather than just to cities and farms.

"It has a mission to protect the natural resources," said Brad Sewell, senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It's no surprise at all that they want to cut out the Department of the Interior."

The motive is to respond to concerns of the state, sugar farms and city water utilities, which all would prefer that the Army Corps and the state make the decisions, he said.

During the long fight to develop and gain support for an Everglades restoration plan, one fear among environmentalists was that a plan billed as a restoration project could be twisted into nothing more than a big local water project.

"The great amount of discretion granted the Corps and the state, and the lack of meaningful restoration standards, perpetuates the dominance of political influence over science, which has historically allowed the destruction of the Everglades," states the letter from the coalition.

Stuart Appelbaum, Everglades director for the Corps of Engineers, denied that any attempt was being made to reduce the Interior Department's influence on the project or to downgrade the restoration in favor of local water users. The reason the regulations lacked specificity was that it was simply impossible to draft complex engineering plans in time to have the final rules done the 2002 deadline set by Congress, he said.

"There's a lot of technical documentation that are in an early state of development, and they're not ready yet," he said. He stressed that the rules released last week were a first draft and that the Army Corps was prepared to make changes. "We welcome comments, welcome dialogue," he said. "I'm sure we can work out these issues."

Ann Klee, a top official in the Interior Department, said the draft rules fail to recognize the Interior Department's role as the guardian of the Everglades. "The Department of the Interior has a special role and a special responsibility," she said. "I think the language doesn't quite get us there."

But she disagreed with the dark spin put on the rules by the environmental groups, and she said she expected the problems to be worked out in the next drafts.

"This is just the starting point," she said. "It's giving us an opportunity to start talking about some concerns."

Graham told the group, "I share many of your concerns relating to the need for greater specificity and consultation, and the need for time limits and greater accountability."

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Everglades Revival

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WILL THE MASSIVE \$8 billion program for re-plumbing the Everglades actually succeed in reviving the unique wetlands ecosystem that was decimated by years of federal reclamation and flood-control projects? A broad-ranging look at the project by The Post's Michael Grunwald raised that question last week, and underscored the need for strong and continuing oversight as the ambitious restoration effort moves forward.

Danger looms in two directions. One is that engineers can't say for sure that the technological fixes on which the plan depends will work as hoped. If the scientists and engineers can't "get the water right," as local officials say, the ecosystem's hoped-for recovery won't materialize. The other is that, with benefits for industry and development materializing faster than benefits for the environment, Congress will run out of patience, and federal support for the project will dry up before its goals are reached. The reasons for worry show up starkly in the "Lake Belt," a quarrying project at the Everglades' edge that is eating away 21,000 acres of wetlands even though it's not at all guaranteed its promised future water storage benefits will materialize. There are also signs of hope, such as the Indian River Lagoon Project, where Army Corps of Engineers officials responded to local activists and changed a project design to meet environmental needs. The restoration project, funded half by the federal government and half by the state of Florida, was designed to serve a wide range of interests, including water supply and flood control for booming South Florida: The strains inherent in encompassing them all are clear.

The federal interest in the project is in reviving the unique wetlands ecology and protecting it from future harm. Congress must keep pushing to uphold that mission. A House subcommittee took a step in that direction this week by voting to boost the Interior Department's role in the restoration effort. President Bush, who has pledged to be a good steward of the Everglades, has a role as well. His administration is developing the regulations that will guide the re-plumbing project; draft rules are now under review in the Office of Management and Budget. To meet his commitment, those rules must be strong and specific enough to protect the restoration goals. The damage done by years of effort to drain the Everglades can never be fully undone, but the federal government took on the right mission when it set out to restore what can be healed. Now the challenge is to keep it on course.