

## **At season's end: A Status Update on Water Quality Initiatives**

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As the tourist and Florida legislative seasons end, there are reasons for optimism relative to some of the recent initiatives to improve the quality of the water that surrounds the Refuge. Unfortunately, that optimism needs to be guarded, because so much more needs to be done. This article will highlight some of what has been accomplished in the last few months and some of the key initiatives that still need attention.

### **Everglades Restoration**

One major bright spot is the budget that the Florida legislature recently passed includes \$682 million for water quality, Everglades restoration, and other environmental projects. The overall appropriation for Everglades-related projects is \$322 million. This money will go towards both Everglades restoration and the early planning, design, and construction of the EAA reservoir.

The cost of Everglades restoration, however, is supposed to be split 50-50 between the State of Florida and the federal government. In late January, all 27 Florida members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter to President Trump requesting \$200 million in funding to support restoration of the Everglades. In February, Florida's governor and both U.S. senators sent a letter to the President in which they requested his sustained commitment of \$200 million a year in construction funding to support restoration of the Everglades. In May, the South Florida Water Management District sent the president a similar letter. The President's budget, which is yet to be approved by Congress, calls for only \$70 million for Everglades restoration.

The budget also includes \$40 million to speed up and complete the final phase of the project to raise the Tamiami Trail. When complete, this project will restore the flow of more than 900 million gallons per day of water flowing south into Everglades National Park.

### **Blue-green Algae**

The budget includes \$10 million for a blue-green algae task force. As specified by Governor DeSantis, the goal of the task force is to identify opportunities to fund priority projects with state, local, and federal funding. The creation of the blue-green algae task force is an important step forward. However, a large open question is what proactive policies the state of Florida will enact to eliminate or at least reduce future algae blooms.

### **Septic Systems**

The budget includes \$25 million for septic-to-sewer conversions. The importance of that budget item was highlighted by the recently published results of the first phase of a study of the sources of water pollution in the Caloosahatchee River and its watershed. The study sampled surface and groundwater in North Fort Myers and found significant pollution as well as widespread septic dysfunction. See [more](#). Florida House Bill 85 addressed the problem of septic dysfunction by

requiring homeowners with septic tanks to have the tanks pumped out and inspected every five years. That bill was indefinitely postponed.

### **Lake Okeechobee**

The Army Corps of Engineers typically keeps the level of the water in Lake Okeechobee between 12.5 and 15.5 feet. To improve the health of the lake, the corps is exercising a one-time exception to that practice and is in the process of lowering the level to roughly 10.5 feet. That process, which many groups strongly object, should reduce the likelihood that the corps will have to make massive releases out of Lake O this summer.

### **Stay vigilant**

In total, a lot of progress has been made since last year's ecological disaster. However, restoring the quality of the water that surrounds the Refuge will be a long, demanding process and we are only in the early stages.