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ENVIRONMENT Everglades projects see some progress

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01/10/2010
Miami Herald, The
Morgan, Curtis

Ten years ago, giddy over passage of a landmark state-federal agreement to restore the Everglades, environmentalists set a sweeping, ambitious and impossible agenda for the coming decade.

Revive flows to parched Everglades National Park. Reverse declines in Lake Okeechobee. Manage suburban growth to protect wetlands and water. Build three-quarters of the reservoirs and enough projects to hit half the restoration targets for the River of Grass.

As the Everglades Coalition wraps up its 25th annual conference Sunday in Palm Beach Gardens, those lofty goals remain years away. Yet, after a decade marked by delay, lawsuits and red tape, not to mention a rocky state-federal partnership rumored on the verge of breakup more often than Brad and Angelina, Everglades advocates and restoration agencies spent the weekend professing they've regained their mojo.

Eric Draper , Audubon of Florida's state director, compared the Everglades effort to a football game. ``We've been in the fight for 25 years. We're continuing to put points on the board."

In those sporting terms, a spurt of late fourth quarter scoring has rescued an otherwise fumbling decade. The Obama administration has come off the bench to pump some \$600 million of federal stimulus and budget cash into Glades projects.

The White House sent five high-ranking aides to the conference, the largest annual gathering of environmental groups in Florida, who all called the restoration a top environmental priority.

``The commitment is real. The money is real. The determination is real," said Thomas Strickland , an assistant U.S. Interior Secretary.

The federal money, over this year and next, finally began putting a dent in a 6-to-1 spending imbalance with the

state. It also bankrolled two ground-breakings in the past two months on long-stalled projects -- the overhaul of Tamiami Trail and the reclamation of a defunct subdivision in the Picayune Strand in Southwest Florida. A third is near on repairs to the C-111 canal in South Miami-Dade, which has siphoned water from the park and Florida Bay .

In coming months, Strickland told coalition members, the administration hopes to unveil plans to add up to five more miles of bridges along the Trail and speed up projects to remove many of the levees and canals to the north of the historic road that bottle up the flow of the River of Grass.

Then there's Gov. Charlie Crist's still incomplete Hail Mary pass, the controversial \$536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields from U.S. Sugar -- an acquisition that could help resolve water storage and quality issues that threaten the Glades.

Despite the recent progress and promise of a massive chunk of sugar land, coalition leaders acknowledge it will be a major challenge to continue the momentum.

The sugar deal, for starters, faces looming deadlines and legal challenges from the Miccosukee Tribe and rival grower Florida Crystals. Critics contend the sugar deal will push back restoration project already running years behind. Not a single of the 68 restoration projects has been built yet.

' A DISAPPOINTMENT'

Barbara Miedema , vice president of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, said many farmers who once backed the effort now oppose it.

``It's been a disappointment," she said. ``Nothing really has happened. It's been hopes and dreams, and nothing else has happened."

Finding funding will only get tougher. The coalition hopes for \$305 million in federal dollars this year. Nancy Sutley , chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality , pledged continued support but cautioned the budget, to be released in February, would be ``tight."

Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, which manages restoration programs for the state, said Tallahassee is projecting a \$5 billion shortfall this year. Declining property values in South Florida also will continue to cut into the district's budget.

``I thought last year was the worst yet," she said. ``I think it's going to be this year."

TOUGH ISSUES

Still, environmentalists and agency managers think they've worked through tough issues, such as cost-sharing, and they hope to reduce complex federal regulations that have slowed planning and project. With a change in administrations in Tallahassee and Washington easing strain between, they hope the train will pick up speed.

``We probably didn't appreciate 10 years ago how extraordinarily complex this was," said Stuart Applebaum , Everglades program manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is overseeing construction.

The decade also taught coalition leaders some hard political lessons. It won't get built all at once. The initial Tamiami Trail and C-111 projects are small, a fraction of the work environmentalists eventually hope to see. But instead of complaining, they're celebrating.

They're not big enough, or going in fast enough, but at least they finally can point to some things being built. Progress, at last.

``We've matured," said Sara Fain , a coalition co-chair and Everglades manager for the National Parks Conservation Association . ``We're taking things in steps."

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Everglades Advocates Try to Jump-Start Restoration

01/09/2010

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Sun Sentinel - Deerfield Beach Bureau

Reid, Andy

The Everglades, suffering from decades of damage and neglect, can't afford to wait out a dreary economy for help to restore life-giving water flows, environmentalists warned Friday.

The Everglades Coalition on Friday released a 10-year plan that calls for state and federal officials to deliver hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars by 2011, and billions in the years to come, for projects to revive South Florida's famed River of Grass.

That includes getting another \$305 million in the next federal budget and at least \$100 million from the state for targeted restoration projects.

In addition, the coalition is urging the South Florida Water Management District to finalize a \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. that would be used for restoration.

The coalition also called on Congress to authorize four long-planned restoration projects, including a 7,700-acre water storage area in western Broward County.

The Everglades suffers from decades of draining and pollution due to farming and development spreading across South Florida.

Restoration plans call for building a series of reservoirs and treatment areas to re-create water flows that once naturally cascaded south from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Supporters contend that reviving the Everglades protects a one-of-a-kind ecosystem, as well as South Florida's drinking water supply.

"We know that we can't wait any longer," said Sara Fain, co-chairperson of the coalition. "Every day that we don't restore the Everglades, it gets worse."

Environmentalists and political heavyweights are meeting this weekend at the Everglades Coalition's 25th annual conference, being held this year at the PGA National Resort and Spa in Palm Beach Gardens. State and federal officials on Friday pledged their support for restoring the Everglades, but stopped short of committing to the total dollar figures sought by the coalition. A nationwide economic downturn has resulted in budget crunches for local, state and federal government.

Getting the federal government to deliver on its commitment to split restoration costs with the state had slowed construction since 2000. But under President Obama's administration, Everglades construction funding surged to more than \$500 million.

"We are doing our best to get our act together in the federal government," said Assistant Secretary of the Interior Thomas Strickland. "The commitment is real. ... The determination is real."

State and federal officials said Friday that the money to help the Everglades would have to come without raising taxes.

"We have to work within some significant fiscal restraints," said Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

The coalition contends a vital lift for the Everglades would come from Gov. Charlie Crist's proposal for South Florida taxpayers to pay U.S. Sugar \$536 million to buy 73,000 acres that would be used for restoration.

U.S. Sugar land, once off limits to restoration efforts, could be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas or swapped for more strategically located land.

A legal fight, still pending before the Florida Supreme Court, could torpedo the deal. The Miccosukee Tribe and sugar producer Florida Crystals oppose the deal, saying it costs taxpayers too much and takes money away from other stalled restoration projects.

Cost concerns in the Legislature also pose a potential threat to the U.S. Sugar land deal, said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation.

"The clock is ticking," Fordham said.

In recent months, Everglades advocates celebrated groundbreaking on two delayed restoration projects: raising a stretch of Tamiami Trail to increase water flows to Everglades National Park and restoring the 55,000-acre Picayune Strand, a failed development in Southwest Florida.

"We need to keep that momentum going forward," said Fain, of the Everglades Coalition. "It's ambitious, but it's attainable."

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

Everglades advocates try to jump-start restoration

01/09/2010

Palm Beach Post - Online

Westgate, Belle Glade Red Cross shelters opening today 22 mins ago

Everglades advocates try to jump-start restoration 1:12 p.m.

I-95 southbound crash at Palmetto Park Road backs up traffic 11:42 a.m.

Jupiter BMX bike exhibit cancelled due to weather 10:57 a.m.

27-year-old shot and killed in Dunbar Village last night 10:33 a.m.

Sun Sentinel

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Everglades Coalition Releases Its 2020 Vision for Everglades Restoration

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01/09/2010

Common Dreams

At its 25th Annual Conference, the Everglades Coalition today released its 2020 vision for Everglades restoration. Elected officials, environmental groups, and community leaders gathered to discuss the Changing Face of Everglades Restoration, and develop solutions for the next ten years of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

"As state and federal partners and the environmental community gather to celebrate a year of change, we must work together to ensure the next decade of restoration puts us well on our way to a restored Everglades," said Sara Fain, National Co-Chair of the Everglades Coalition and Everglades Restoration Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association.

Over the last year, the Everglades has finally received significant federal funding, ground has been broken on two key projects—Tamiami Trail and Picayune Strand—and the State of Florida's planning for the River of Grass Initiative has moved into its second phase. As we enter the second decade of restoration, the Coalition says it is time to fully fund and build critical projects, and set an example for the world.

"This is an exciting time in restoration, but we can't stop now," said Mark Perry, State Co-chair of the Everglades Coalition and Executive Director of the Florida Oceanographic Society. "As the Everglades continues to decline, we believe our list of priorities for 2020 is key to turning restoration around."

Highlights from the Everglades Coalition 2020 Vision for Everglades Restoration include:

1. The U.S. Congress and the Florida State Legislature must fund key restoration projects. Adequately fund the Indian River Lagoon, Picayune Strand, Site One Impoundment, and Modified Water Deliveries projects and other critical projects and programs in FY2011 with \$305 million, which will result in critical on-the-ground benefits throughout the ecosystem. Ensure the state of Florida continues its financial support for restoration at or above previous funding levels.
2. Congress must authorize four key restoration projects in the 2010 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). Four projects that must be authorized in WRDA include the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands, C-111 Spreader Canal phase 1, C-43 Reservoir, and the Broward County Water Preserve Area.
3. The State of Florida must, upon closing its first deal with U.S. Sugar Corporation this summer, immediately announce the commencement of a restoration project on the newly-acquired lands and begin negotiations to act on its option to acquire the remaining 100,000+ acres. This unprecedented opportunity to fix long-standing shortcomings in restoration projects and our ability to meet the region's water supply, ecosystem restoration, and flood protection demands must be seized for the benefit of all Floridians.
4. Everglades Coalition 2020 Vision for restoration provides detailed recommendations to successfully move restoration towards completion. Building on the Coalition's Priorities for 2010, the 2020 Vision will provide direction for local, state, and federal officials as they proceed forward with restoration planning and projects, as well as decisions that may impact restoration goals.

"For more than a quarter of a century, the Everglades Coalition has dedicated its efforts to protecting and restoring our River of Grass," said John Marshall of the Arthur R. Marshall Foundation, this year's conference host. "We are delighted to host this year's conference, as Palm Beach County must be a full partner in Everglades restoration for the benefit of the entire ecosystem and our community."

"If we are successful here over the next decade, we will set an example for all other ecosystem restoration initiatives nationally and internally," said Mark Perry. "With the establishment of the Great Waters Coalition to create a united agenda to benefit all ecosystems, we must strive for the Everglades to serve as a model to follow."

Joining the Coalition for its 25th anniversary conference, keynote speakers include U.S. Senator Bill Nelson, former U.S. Senator and Florida Governor Bob Graham, Thomas Strickland, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Sam Hamilton. Sessions focus on topics such as growth management, political and public partnerships, endangered and invasive species, wildlife habitat, energy policies, and water quality.

The Everglades Coalition annual conference is the largest annual forum for Everglades conservation and restoration, bringing together the Coalition's 53 allied organizations with local, state, and federal partners. Senators, members of Congress, and political figures come to discuss their positions, pledge their support and offer challenges to the community.

To view the Coalition's 2020 Vision for the Everglades Restoration, visit: www.evergladescoalition.org.

Everglades Coalition conference to discuss restoration

01/08/2010

Miami Herald - Online, The

CURTIS MORGAN

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THE EVERGLADES

Progress, or the lack of it, on Everglades restoration is the focus of a major environmental conference this weekend in Palm Beach Gardens.

Top White House aides and state political leaders will address the Everglades Coalition's 25th annual conference, the largest gathering of environmental groups in the state.

The meeting comes a decade after a state and federal agreement to restore the Everglades. There has been recent progress and groundbreakings, the latest on Thursday for a \$53 million project to turn a long-failed subdivision in the Picayune Strand in Southwest Florida back into 55,000 acres of wetlands.

But the effort remains dogged by delays and continual controversies -- the latest and hottest being Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar. Though the deal has been approved by water managers, it still faces legal challenges from the Miccosukee Tribe and rival growers.

Another top concern for environmental groups is whether the Obama administration plans to continue its initial impressive funding of restoration projects. The White House has pledged nearly a half-billion dollars.

Among the highlight speakers are Alex Sink, the state's chief financial officer and a Democratic candidate for governor. U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, a Republican from Martin County whose district includes a large swath of farmland, is the keynote speaker Saturday night.

Other speakers include U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Florida; Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton; state Senate President Jeff Atwater, a Republican from Palm Beach County; former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham and Tom Strickland, an assistant U.S. Interior secretary.

The conference runs through Sunday at the PGA National Resort & Spa. The public can attend but there is a registration fee of \$110 per day or \$190 for the entire conference. For information and a schedule, go to www.evergladescoalition.org.

