

REFLECTIONS

Who we are and what we do

at the

SOUTH FLORIDA
WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT



our mission

*to manage and protect
water resources of the region
by balancing and improving
water quality, flood control,
natural systems and water supply*

ON THE COVER



A scientist monitors plants in a stormwater treatment area, part of an Everglades water quality improvement effort. These marsh plants will uptake phosphorus and filter the water before it flows to the Everglades.



There was a time in southeastern Florida when a continuous cypress swamp narrowly bordered the Everglades' eastern edge.

These ancient trees can grow to heights of 130 feet with bases over 10 feet in diameter.

Wet-footed mystery trees, cypress stand guard in South Florida's remaining freshwater swamps.



PROVIDING FLOOD CONTROL

is at the core of our mission; however, our responsibilities have increased greatly since being created by the state legislature in 1949. We employ approximately 1,800 people

Employees operate and maintain the regional water management system, monitor the weather and are stewards of public lands.

Our workforce develops water supply plans, provides research, regulates land and water use, purchases land for preservation and implements ecosystem restoration.

Our employees handle the economics and information components of managing water. They conduct environmental monitoring and assessment, develop the budget, produce public information materials and oversee contractual services.

Our engineers design and construct projects to improve water quality and revitalize the ecosystem. Building Everglades Restoration projects will also provide additional flood control and water supply options, along with recreational opportunities.

The weather in South Florida can be erratic and unpredictable. In fact, it has been said that if you don't like the weather wait a few moments or cross the street.

DRENCHED IN SUNSHINE

For most of the year, it is easy to call South Florida "paradise." Turquoise seas lap the shoreline and gently swaying palm trees stir the breezes for easy living and great recreation. But there was a day the area was much less than a desirable place to live.

WET is southern Florida in its natural state. One could argue the first letters once stood for Soggy and Flat. As recently as a hundred years ago, for most of the year, the terrain was wild and wet. Hardy pioneers assumed the plentiful, large mosquitoes had to be the state bird.

Because the land is so flat, during the wet season (May through October) water could flow from lake to lake, spill over natural river channels and spread into floodplains. There were no barriers or canals to direct or control the path of water.

In the aftermath of large storms, water could stand for weeks and months and leave devastating damage and disease in its wake. During the drier months of winter and spring, Florida had its own version of the dust bowl days — cows went thirsty and crops withered on parched land.

Geography sentences Florida to total dependence on rainfall. To make our watery state more inhabitable, through the years we attempted to control the water. For more than a century, from 1850 to 1950, the solution was to dredge and drain the "swamp."

After years of severe hurricanes, then drought, then more deadly storms, Florida asked the federal government for a master plan to tame nature's excesses.



In 1948, the U.S. Congress authorized the largest civil works project in the country. Construction began the next year and continued for over 20 years as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a massive plumbing system called the Central and Southern Florida Project.

The project stretches from just south of Orlando to Florida Bay. It includes an extensive network of canals, levees, water storage areas, water control structures and pumping stations to help capture and move water when needed.

In 1949, the state created our agency — the South Florida Water Management District — to be the local sponsor for the federal project. Additional components have been added over time and, today, we are responsible for operating and maintaining more than 2,300 miles of canals and levees, 2,200 structures and 61 pumping stations. Our primary role is to smooth the peaks and valleys of the dry and wet seasons.

Specifically, our mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving four major elements: water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply.

The large public works project built in the '50s and '60s to manage the water works very well. As well as provide flood control during the wet season and water supply during the dry months, the project drained floodplains and wetlands making them more accessible to humans.

Urban development and agricultural production flourished. At the same time, the altered environment became inhospitable to native plants and wildlife. The number of wading birds decreased along with the amount of wetlands.

In the 1970s, as more habitats showed signs of distress, our responsibilities expanded to encompass environmental protection.

During the last century, the Everglades decreased in size dramatically. Current restoration projects are under way in both the northern and southern reaches of the interconnected Everglades ecosystem — from the upper chain of lakes, to Lake Okeechobee and coastal estuaries, to Florida Bay.

Recognizing that a healthy ecosystem is vital to a healthy economy, we are collaborating with our federal partners, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and our state partners, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, to implement the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and other water resources projects designed to benefit the environment and people. Working together, we are committed TODAY to shape the Florida our children will have TOMORROW.



HISTORICALLY, SOUTH FLORIDA

was a giant marsh fed by rainfall. Like a glacier slowly moving over a huge mass of land, during the rainy wet season, sheets of water would move down the state through what was then the great expanse of Everglades.

Theoretically, a drop of water could fall on a leaf in the upper chain of lakes, travel down the meandering Kissimmee River, float over the natural southern shore of Lake Okeechobee, ride the sheet of water slowly gliding over the southern peninsula and finally drift into Florida Bay.



We oversee water resources in the southern half of the state. We manage water in one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world – the Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades system – stretching 240 miles from Orlando to the Florida Keys.

We provide water when there is not enough and take it away when there is too much. We channel and regulate water through canals that crisscross the southern peninsula to meet the needs of all users.

We safeguard the region's water quality to ensure enough usable water 50 years from now. Managing water for cities, farms and the natural environment is a balancing act with competing needs and conflicting responsibilities. Major restoration projects dovetail our missions of flood control and water supply.

We restore floodplains along the Kissimmee River, revitalize the shoreline habitats on Lake Okeechobee and will retool the flood control system to capture the 1.7 billion gallons of water now lost to sea and to better mimic the way nature delivered water to the Everglades.

VISION



*to be the world's premier
water resource agency*

REFLECTIONS

Is one in a series of brochures that *reflect* the mission of the South Florida Water Management District. This information is also available as a PowerPoint presentation.



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