

President's \$80 million in state wetland conservation announced in Kissimmee



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President Barack Obama's administration Friday announced at the Disney Wilderness Preserve in Kissimmee there would be \$80 million in additional funding for farmers and ranchers who voluntarily conserve wetlands as part of the Florida Everglades restoration.

This funding is additional to the \$1.5 billion earmarked by the President's America's Great Outdoor initiative, which includes \$900 million to begin key construction projects aimed at restoring natural water flow and essential habitat to the wetlands.

"The key is strategically-placed efforts where we will get the most environmental impact," U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said, adding no other state has received similar funding for conservation projects. "This funding is a model for the rest of the country."

Working off of a new report, also released Friday, detailing where funding will be used on extensive projects around the state, officials discussed partnering with local farmers and ranchers, working to restore water flow and quality and conserving habitats for Florida's endangered and threatened species, such as the Florida panther, while eliminating evasive wildlife and foliage.

"We've been studying the Everglades for decades. There's no reason to reinvent the wheel here," Assistant Secretary of the Army Jo-Ellen Darcy said. "We have seized the opportunity for stakeholders to work together toward common goal of restoring the Everglades."

Part of that restoration includes preserving habitats to protect the more than 60 species found in the Everglades that are on the federal threatened or endangered lists, or other state lists.

More than \$130 million has been allocated since 2009 to restore flood plains and water flow through the Kissimmee River, preserving more than 3,000 acres of habitat. President Obama's Fiscal Year 2013 budget also includes more than \$27 million for the Kissimmee River Restoration Project focused on restoring flood plains and water flow from the Kissimmee River.

Additionally, since January, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the 150-acre Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area in the Kissimmee River Basin.

This refuge, which was a partnership with local ranchers, farmers and landowners, connects existing conservation lands with working ranches; creates wildlife corridors, enhances water quality, quantity and storage; protect rare species; and provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation.

"The health of this ecosystem affects everything from water quality and biodiversity to tourism, and industry that supports thousands of jobs across the state," Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson said. "The success we've already seen in restoring the land, water and wildlife of the Everglades shows how investments in America's extraordinary outdoors are also investments in our health and our economic future."

Since 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has invested more than \$360 million to work with ranchers and farmers who voluntarily conserve resources on their properties in the name of Everglades restoration.

More than 100,000 acres have been enrolled in wetland conservation easement programs and more than 7,000 acres of farm and ranch lands have been enrolled into Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program contracts.

Several projects are geared toward shifting the 1.7 billion gallons of water that once flowed through the Everglades and now bypass the ecosystem to flow directly into the ocean or Gulf of Mexico back toward the Everglades.

The key construction projects to help accomplish this task include elevating the Tamiami Trail One Mile Bridge to allow more natural water flow into the southern Everglades; the Site-1 impoundment at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge to protect habitats and provide 4 billion gallons of drinking water for Palm Beach County; the Indian River Lagoon-South Project aimed at allowing more ecologically sound water management in the Everglades system; and the Picayune Strand Project which will restore water flow to 55,000 acres of the area by plugging canals and removing roads for a failed residential area.

With more than 7 million Floridians using the Everglades as their primary source of drinking water, these projects are critical not just to water quality but to quantity as well.

In June, the Obama Administration reached an agreement with Florida government to reduce harmful phosphorus pollution in the Everglades, including an \$879 million commitment by the state for projects such as establishing a scientific-based limit on

phosphorous discharges into the wetlands, efforts to remove the mineral from the wetlands to achieve that limit and enforceable framework to ensure compliance with the project.