Florida Oceanographic Society

Position Statement

Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP)

March 13, 2001

Under the existing Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project of 1948, there are over 1,200 miles of canals and levees, hundreds of pump stations, culverts, weirs and other water control structures. The Kissimmee River has been channalized, a large dike was built around Lake Okeechobee and major canals connecting the Lake to the St. Lucie River and Caloosahatchee River estuaries have been used to maintain artificially high water levels in the Lake. Four main canals connecting the south end of the Lake to the Atlantic Ocean through the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) are maintained to drain the EAA for agriculture and supply irrigation water. Currently, 1.6 billion gallons of fresh water per day are discharged through this water management system out to the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico while having major impacts on coastal estuaries. The natural flows of the Kissimmee-Lake Okeechobee-Everglades ecosystem have been drastically altered along with major impacts to estuaries, Florida Bay and the coastal reef ecosystems. The U.S. Congress in 1994 and 96 required the Secretary of the Army to do a comprehensive review of the Flood Control Project with the goal of restoring the South Florida ecosystems.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is the new name given to the Central and Southern Florida Project Comprehensive Review Study or "Restudy" submitted to Congress in 1999 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District. CERP was approved by Congress and signed by the President in December 2000. It authorizes a $7.8 billion plan over the next 30 years for the purpose of "restoring, preserving and protecting the South Florida ecosystem".

The Plan contains 50 construction features, 9 operational features and 6 pilot projects. Only a few of the smaller projects are specifically designed for restoration of natural systems. The majority of the projects are structural additions including above-ground reservoirs, stormwater treatment areas (STA), aquifer storage and recovery wells (ASR) and wastewater treatment plant expansions. Here are specific concerns regarding the plan;

1 – The construction projects in the Kissimmee River Region are scheduled to be reservoirs and STAs with some dredging of sediments. **Position:** The Kissimmee River valley must be restored to the meandering river and wide flood plain on either side of the River to slow the flows to the Lake and provide water quality treatment in the Kissimmee River Region. Any construction projects in the CERP must work together with ongoing restoration efforts.

2 – The main construction feature ($1.1 billion) of CERP is a series of 200 Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) wells located around Lake Okeechobee. The ASR wells are designed to store 1 billion gallons per day of excess surface water from the Lake into deep wells for storage and possible recovery. Aquifer Storage and Recovery pumps the surface water into the deep Floridan Aquifer, which is highly mineralized. The fresh water is supposed to float on top of the mineralized water to be pumped back up to the surface or "recovered" when fresh water is needed. More than 55 additional ASR wells are planned in areas around the south Florida region as a part of the Plan. **Position:** ASR wells will have unknown regional and local effects on the quality and structure of the Floridan Aquifer. The fresh water will move in the Aquifer and the recovery rates are doubtful. Also the water quality of the recovered water may not be up to standard to resupply the surface water and would have to be treated. The surface water storage issues need to be addressed at the source of the problem, not pumping the water into deep wells and continuing to waste this fresh water resource The water levels in Lake Okeechobee should be restored at 12 to 15 feet and excess surface water should flow south from the Lake as the "River of Grass" once did to restore the natural hydroperiods to the Everglades and recharge the fresh water shallow aquifers.

3 – In the Upper East Coast, the second largest project ($710 million) is the C/23,24,25/ Northfork and Southfork Storage Reservoirs, which connect to the St. Lucie Estuary. This project is being combined with the C-44 Basin Storage Reservoir project ($112 million) and together they are called the Indian River Lagoon Restoration Feasibility Study. Five alternatives were proposed by the Study Team and they are recommending 150,000 acre feet of water storage in above-ground reservoirs, STA's, 92,000 acres of Natural Area Restoration and a connecting flowway from C-23 to C-44 canals. The C-23, 24 &25 canals were built to drain the land for agriculture and also now supply water for irrigation. The discharges from these canals enter the St. Lucie Estuary with high concentrations of phosphorus, nitrogen, heavy metals, pesticides and herbicides. **Position:** There should be no discharges from these canals into the Estuary. Water should be stored and treated on the lands where rains fall (at the source) and should be the responsibility of the agricultural lands. Lands to be restored should follow natural hydroperiods and allow the recharge of the Shallow Water aquifer and there should be no new direct connections made between the C23/24/25 basin and the C44 basin.

4 – The EAA Reservoir Storage project is planned to be 60,000 acres of water storage primarily for agricultural water supply. This is the only "restoration" project planned in the EAA. In 1999 the District purchased the Talisman property, 60,000 acres, for $133 million and leased it back to sugar cane farming. This property is supposed to be used for CERP. Agricultural subsidy in the EAA has continued with providing drainage and irrigation water supply, price supports and import quotas for sugar cane farming. **Position:** For a true Comprehensive Everglades "Restoration" Plan we must buy back most of the Everglades Agricultural Area and restore the "River of Grass" south of Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. We must restore the natural flows of water from the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

5 – The South Miami-Dade and West Miami-Dade wastewater treatment plant expansions are utility projects that should not be included in the Plan. **Position:** Water treatment and water reuse systems should be the responsibility of the users within that utility and not part of a national Everglades restoration Plan.

6 – The restoration of the sheetflow between Water Conservation Area (WCA) 3A and 3B is part of CERP. This project includes filling in 130 miles of the Miami River Canal from the EAA south and other canals in WCA 3B and the raising of the Tamiami Trail to allow the sheetflow of water to the Everglades. **Position:** This is a good project and should help restore some of the natural flows to the Everglades.

In summary, The Kissimmee River valley must be restored to the natural winding river and flood plain of the past. Aquifer Storage and Recovery wells will not work and could cause major problems in the Floridan Aquifer while losing our fresh surface water. There should be no discharges from canals into the Estuary and surface water should be contained and treated on site. Pollution should be treated at the source (Accountability). We should buy back the Everglades Agricultural Area and restore the "River of Grass". We should allow Lake Okeechobee to maintain a level around 13 feet and allow the sheetflow of water south from the Lake, through the River of Grass to the Everglades. Water is the critical factor to South Florida's future and we should restore the natural systems for their ability to provide a "sustainable" ecological balance.

As plans and projects move forward, we expect to modify our position accordingly.