



Audubon FLORIDA

Dispersed Water Management in the Northern Everglades: An Opportunity to Expand a Successful Program

Audubon Florida congratulates the South Florida Water Management District (District) for implementing and continuing to fund the successful Dispersed Water Management (DWM) Program in the Northern Everglades. The Northern Everglades Payment for Environmental Services (NE-PES) approach is an important component of this program. The District approved the first eight NE-PES 10-year contracts for approximately \$7 million and has budgeted \$2.7 million in funds for the second NE-PES solicitation in Fiscal Year 2013. In 2011 the District entered into a 10-year lease/project agreement with Lykes Brothers, Inc. for the 16,000 acre Nicodemus Slough Water Management Project which will accommodate approximately 34,000 acre-feet of regional water storage. In addition, the District recently advertised a Dispersed Water Management Invitation for Water Farming Pilot Projects to solicit proposals from landowners to retain or store water on fallow citrus lands to reduce the regional system volume of water being released to the St. Lucie Estuary.

Benefits of the Dispersed Water Management Program

Benefits of the Dispersed Water Management Program are many:

- Flow Attenuation – Reduces volume and rate of flow to the local watershed and damaging discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.
- Base Flow - Increases dry season flows to lakes and rivers to support natural systems and water supplies.
- Wildlife Benefits – Provides habitat enhancement for multiple species at a watershed scale.
- Groundwater Recharge – Allows increased groundwater recharge which reduces the need for alternative water supply projects.
- Water Quality – Improves water quality by providing nutrient and other pollutant uptake by vegetation on project sites.
- Economic – Contributes to the financial viability of ranching and farming as a more extensive working agricultural land use.
- Adaptive Management – Contracts are reviewed and renewed on 10-year increments which gives the District flexibility to modify contractual terms as future conditions change. This is not an option with traditional storage projects.

- **Expeditious** – Projects can be implemented quickly.
- **Fiscal Management** – Provides the District and other agencies with water management and environmental benefits without large up-front capital expenditures and long term operations and maintenance costs.

Recommendation

Water quality data from the District indicate that the Lake Okeechobee TMDLs are not being met. This is a serious trend which has continued after several regional water quality enhancement projects have come on line. In addition, previous SFWMD planning efforts identified a need for around 900,000- 1,300,000 acre feet of storage/detention in the Northern Everglades. It is clear that additional creative solutions are needed to temporarily store and clean up water before it enters Lake Okeechobee.

Audubon Florida strongly recommends that the District expand the existing DWM to include more projects covering more land area in the Northern Everglades Basin. The DWM Program has proven to have water management and environmental benefits at a cost-effective and sustainable manner.

Ranchers and farmers in the Northern Everglades Basin are very supportive of the DWM Program and would be interested in considering expansion of the Program on their lands.

In light of current fiscal constraints being faced by the District and agriculture community it makes sense to expand the DWM Program to allow for more sources of funding to gain storage of water from the regional system on privately owned lands.

Logical Next Step

A logical first step prior to formally expanding the DWM Program would be to conduct an assessment of the potential basin-wide storage and water quality benefits associated with DWM expansion. Audubon Florida recommends that District staff or a consultant calculate the amount of surface water storage that would be reasonably expected to be stored if the DWM Program were expanded in the Kissimmee, Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie river basins. The assessment could include a cost comparison between the costs of expanding the DWM Programs against the costs of using a more traditionally engineered surface water reservoir systems, ASR wells, and/or Storm Water Treatment Areas to capture the same amount of water. This valuable information would provide the District Governing Board with objective data to properly evaluate alternatives for storing and improving the quality of water flowing into Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades Agriculture Area and the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.