



RECLAIMING THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES

The Florida Everglades, formed over thousands of years, is a vast wetland ecosystem encompassing over 4,500 miles of rivers, lakes and estuaries. Its unique water and vegetation provides home to thousands of animals, birds, fish, plants, and reptilian species. The Everglades Ecosystem extends from the Kissimmee River Chain of Lakes south of Orlando, through the Kissimmee River, engulfing Lake Okeechobee and the waters of the Florida Bay.

The Florida Everglades is one of the largest wetlands in the world. It supplies water to one in three Floridians. The

Florida Everglades draw over 1 million visitors annually and serve an important role in the tourism, agricultural, real estate and recreational industries in the state.

Florida is currently undertaking the largest environmental restoration project in the nation's history. No other government in the world has invested as much time or money in improving the quality of one natural ecosystem. By restoring the Everglades, Florida will improve the quality of life for the seven million residents of South Florida, provide improved flood control for the region, establish a reliable supply of water for millions of Floridians, supply the essential amount of water for restoration, protect the natural plant life and revive the habitat for 60 threatened and endangered species that currently exist in the Everglades.

In fact, because Florida recognizes the importance of the Everglades and it has become the subject of one of the biggest ecological restoration efforts ever undertaken, the Florida Legislature decided at its 2012 legislative session to create a special observance of the Everglades on April 7th of each year. SB 924, sponsored by the Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee and Senators David Simmons, Ellyn Bogdanoff, Jack Latvala, Gwen Margolis, and Nan Rich, creates section 683.185, Florida Statutes, designating April 7th of each year as "Everglades Day", with an effective date of July 1, 2012.

Additionally, the Florida Everglades has been designated an International Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage Site, and a Wetland of International Importance in recognition of both its local and global significance. Moreover, the Florida Everglades National Park,

By Thornton J. Williams, Williams McMillian PA which draws an average of 1 million visitors annually, will celebrate its 65th anniversary in 2012.

In turn, during this 2012 legislative session, Governor Rick Scott requested \$40 million for the Everglades restoration. In the end, the Legislature provided \$30 million for Everglades restoration plus \$5 million for the northern Everglades (north of Lake Okeechobee) and estuaries programs. In addition, after vetoing Florida Forever spending authority last year, Governor Scott requested \$15 million for the program in fiscal year 2012-13. The Legislature provided \$8.3 million.

In summation, Florida's Governor and the Legislature have recognized the importance of the Florida Everglades through its actions during the 2012 Legislative session. The significant economic and ecological importance of the Everglades ecosystem is an invaluable part of Florida's heritage and its future. Restoring both the natural and man-made environments of the Everglades to a healthy and sustainable ecosystem provides the framework for future restoration projects throughout the world. Florida has undoubtedly proven itself a leader and an example to the nation with this historical environmental undertaking. ■

About the Author:



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