MEMORANDUM

TO: Governing Board Members

FROM: Kenneth G. Ammon, P.E., Deputy Executive Director, Everglades Restoration and Capital Projects

DATE: September 1, 2009

SUBJECT: Letter of Support for the Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Final Integrated Project Implementation Report and Environmental Assessment

Background:
The SFWMD and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), with input from other federal, state, and local agency staff, have completed the Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Final Integrated Project Implementation Report and Environmental Assessment (PIR/EA).

Biological control is the purposeful introduction of natural enemies, usually insects, as a means to weaken and suppress invading plants. The Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Project includes the mass-rearing, field release, establishment, and field monitoring of approved biological control agents for melaleuca and other invasive exotic species.

The Project is intended to control the most aggressive, wide-spread and problematic invasive exotic plants in south Florida known as melaleuca, Brazilian pepper, Old World climbing fern, and Australian pine. South Florida acreage currently infested with these species includes 401,120 acres of melaleuca, 849,576 acres of Brazilian pepper, 171,130 acres of Old World climbing fern and 206,446 acres of Australian pine.

The PIR/EA analyzes and recommends two plans for the control of these exotic species. These plans are based upon varying release strategies for the biological control agents. Both plans recommend the construction of an annex to the existing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Research Service Invasive Plant Research Laboratory in Davie, Florida, to produce the biological control insects needed for this project.

In order to be used for this project, the biological control agent insects already must have undergone a highly intensive testing and permitting process established by the USDA to ensure they are safe for release in the United States. This testing process follows a well-established, rigorous protocol by the USDA, and verifies that these insects will not affect any species but the intended invasive exotic pest plant species,

and will have no adverse ecological or economic effects on the native ecosystem or agricultural industries.

The SFWMD is experienced in the successful deployment of biological controls, having partnered with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the USDA on the release of leaf-eating moths at Jonathan Dickinson State Park and the Cypress Creek Tract, respectively, to help combat Old World climbing fern.

The Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Project is a component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), which was authorized by Congress in Section 601 of the Water Resources Development Act of 2000 (WRDA 2000). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provides the opportunity to accelerate construction of the project's insect-rearing annex to Fiscal Year 2010, allowing benefits to be received earlier. This project's programmatic authority under WRDA 2000 allows for Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works approval without having to go to Congress for authorization.

This action by the Governing Board expresses the Board's non-binding support for the Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Final Integrated Project Implementation Report and Environmental Assessment, and for collaboration with the Corps as it moves forward with contracting for the construction portion of the project.

How this helps meet the District's 10-Year Strategic Plan:
The District has committed to implementation of CERP, which includes the Melaleuca Eradication and Other Exotic Plants – Implement Biological Controls Project. Invasive exotic plant species are degrading and damaging the natural ecosystems in south Florida. These invasive species are widespread and pose a serious threat to the success of any ecosystem restoration initiative, including the CERP.

Funding Source:
No new funding is associated with this action.

This Board item impacts what areas of the District, both resource areas and geography:
The project area includes 16 Florida counties, and encompasses approximately 18,000 square miles from Orlando to the Florida Reef Tract. The planning phase of this project was managed by Everglades Restoration and Capital Projects staff, with consultation from Operations and Maintenance. The implementation including design coordination, construction observation and adaptive management also will be managed by Everglades Restoration and Capital Projects staff in coordination with Operations and Maintenance.

What concerns could this Board item raise?
Since this is a non-binding letter of support and involves no new funding, this action should raise no significant concerns.

Why should the Governing Board approve this item?
Invasive exotic plants are spreading in natural areas, and many are altering Florida's ecosystem structure and function. Plant species that modify ecosystem properties are serious threats to native habitats and ecosystems. The Governing Board should approve this non-binding letter of support, because the primary benefits of this project include preventing expansion of invasive exotic plants into natural areas, and reducing coverage and density of invasive exotics. Other benefits include promoting the re-establishment of native plants, restoring habitat for native birds and wildlife species, and reducing stressors on rare, threatened and endangered species.

This project supports the CERP and other District initiatives. Approval of the Final Integrated PIR/EA is a critical step in the federal process that will allow the Corps to move forward with contracting for the project.

KGA/bw

Attachments – Resolution, Letter of Support, Maps