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Long-stalled project to help Florida Bay, Everglades finally getting started

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10/16/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid South Florida Sun

WEST PALM BEACH - A vital Everglades restoration project, intended to fix decades of environmentally destructive draining, got a long-awaited go-ahead from South Florida water managers on Thursday.

The South Florida Water Management District's board approved construction contracts to start repairing the environmental damage caused by a 15-mile-long canal in southern Miami-Dade County.

The C-111 canal was originally dug to allow barges to float rocket equipment to Cape Canaveral and later used for flood control.

Through the years, the canal west of Florida City drained water away from Everglades National Park and other parts of southwestern Miami-Dade County and sent an influx of water into Florida Bay that damaged sea grasses and produced "dead zones."

Florida Bay fishermen long lobbied to fix the canal they blamed for fouling fish habitat.

Construction contracts approved Thursday are for the initial \$44 million-phase of the project to alter the canal to better control the volume of water and timing of releases to Florida Bay. The work is supposed to begin by the end of the year.

This is one of a long line of stalled Everglades restoration projects that was part of an agreement reached in 2000 to restore more natural water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

"It has just taken a long way to get here," said board member Michael Collins, a Keys fishing guide who pushed for the canal fix. "It's sort of a down payment on the rest of the system."

The C-111 vote is the latest sign of progress in Everglades restoration, said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation. It comes along amid an increase in federal funding and a pending deal to buy vast stretches of U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland to store and clean water headed to the Everglades.

"There is no question that this is a momentous day," Fordham said. "We are seeing momentum that we had all been dreaming about for many years."

The three Florida-based companies awarded construction contracts Thursday include Palm Beach Grading Inc., Wright

Construction Group and GlobeTec Construction.

The state and district have invested about \$2.4 billion in Everglades restoration. Much of that has gone toward buying up 230,000 acres, but few of the envisioned water storage and treatment projects have been finished. Failure of the federal government to deliver money committed for Everglades restoration has been a big factor bogging down construction.

"This is one of those rare champagne moments," district board member Shannon Estenez said Thursday.

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THE ENVIRONMENT Delayed canal overhaul OK'd

10/16/2009

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Miami Herald, The
Morgan, Curtis

Fixes to a canal in South Miami-Dade were approved, representing a milestone for one water management board member and for Everglades restoration efforts.

Back in the 1970s, when Mike Collins was a young flats guide in the Keys, old-timers like legendary fly-fishing pioneer Jimmie Albright already knew what was ailing Florida Bay .

They'd point north, toward the C-111 canal.

Collins pledged to do something about it. On Thursday, he finally did. Along with other board members of the South Florida Water Management District, he approved a \$25 million overhaul for the canal that was cut across the southern Everglades in the 1960s.

Intended to keep farms from flooding and ferry rocket engines from a long-closed plant, the C-111 also slurped fresh water that once flowed south down Taylor Slough and kept northeast Florida Bay a rich, brackish estuary. It's been too salty and sick ever since, wracked by algae blooms and seagrass die-offs that have led to declining populations of birds and fish.

The long-delayed project represents a milestone for Collins and, more importantly, for the broader multibillion-dollar effort to restore the Everglades.

"It's the down payment on the rest of the system, and it lets me keep a promise to a bunch of guys who are dead now that I wouldn't quit until this was done," said Collins, who lives in Islamorada and still guides.

Environmentalists called the C-111 work critical to healing decades of ecological damage to the bay and vast, southernmost wetlands of Miami-Dade and Everglades National Park.

"There is no question this is a momentous day," said Kirk Fordham , chief executive officer of The Everglades Foundation . "The C-111 canal plays an ugly role that is the environmental equivalent to the practice of blood-letting."

The C-111 is so wide and deep that park hydrologists estimate it collects three-quarters of the water that once flowed through Taylor Slough . Instead, it shunts water 20 miles east, where it is periodically dumped in large slugs to devastating effect to Barnes Sound.

The initial work is relatively cheap and simple with the goal of holding more water in the park and raising salinity in coastal bay waters. The project includes 590 acres of "cells," or retention ponds, to hold storm water, two new pumping stations, and berms and plugs in the C-111 and two connecting canals.

The plan is to slowly raise water levels in the southernmost canals -- by one-tenth of a foot a year for five years -- and assess the impact on the Glades, the bay and farm fields to the north.

In many ways, the C-111 is a test case for dozens of restoration projects still to come. Farmers in South Miami-Dade County worry that raising water in the Glades will flood fields. Environmentalists worry the marsh and bay won't get

better if water isn't raised high enough.

To resolve a legal challenge filed by farmers last month, water managers approved a plan for monitoring ground water around the project and on farm fields. They also agreed to hold periodic meetings and updates as water levels rise. The district also terminated the lease of a commercial fish farm near the project.

For Collins, the longest-serving board member, the C-111 projects are a swan song. Appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush , Collins emerged as a dogged critic of Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp , a \$536 million purchase of 73,000 acres the board approved despite his criticism.

After 11 years, his term will be up in March. The possibility Crist will reappoint him? Collins grinned. ``Not a chance."

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COLUMN Same political environment

10/15/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

Joel Engelhardt

Palm Beach Post Editorial Writer

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News item: The state agency that oversees the environment "believes" that "a transportation, warehousing and distribution complex that serves heavy diesel truck traffic and rail operations ... is incompatible" with Everglades restoration.

Makes sense, right? Why would restoring Florida's Everglades go hand-in-glove with creating a center of industry? Environmental groups have been pointing to the contradiction since West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals proposed an inland port on up to 3,500 acres next to its Okeelanta mill. The sugar conglomerate counters that industry and restoration can coexist.

No agency had disputed that view - until now. But look closely at the source. Can the public trust the Florida Department of Environmental Protection?

DEP Secretary Michael Sole was appointed by, and reports to Gov. Crist. They never would countenance meddling with DEP staff. But as soon as the agency's remarks hit the street, Florida Crystals vice president Gaston Cantens, a former state legislator, was blaming politics. The comments are retaliation, he said, for Florida Crystals' opposition to Gov. Crist's proposal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar. "It has more to do with our objections," Mr. Cantens said, "than it has to do with the substance."

This is where we step back and recall the damage done to the DEP by a previous governor, Jeb Bush, who was not above meddling politically in the work of a science-based agency. How do we know? We know because of Herb Zebuth.

Mr. Zebuth, a state biologist from 1981 to 2005, testified under oath about how the Bush administration made clear that it wouldn't allow criticism, even science-based criticism, of its efforts to bring The Scripps Research Institute to Mecca Farms in Palm Beach County. Mr. Zebuth made the mistake of stating a concern about the Bush proposal at a public meeting. It wound up in the newspaper. The next day, he got hauled into a teleconference with then-DEP Secretary David Struhs.

Mr. Struhs discounted Mr. Zebuth's concerns, and asked him to write a letter to the newspaper distancing the DEP from his remarks. Mr. Zebuth took the opportunity to ask Mr. Struhs about something that had been bothering him. What about that general order, he asked, that interference in Scripps would lead to "the harshest possible disciplinary action?" Did Mr. Struhs say, "Don't listen to that hogwash?" No. As Mr. Zebuth testified later in a trial, Mr. Struhs turned to a manager and asked, "You didn't put that in writing, did you?"

In the case of Florida Crystals, the DEP isn't trying to cram unwanted development where it doesn't belong. The agency is taking what appears to be a pro-public position. But still it bears asking, can DEP be trusted? Isn't it under political control, just as it was under Jeb Bush? Once discredited, how can the DEP regain credibility?

Tallahassee had appeared reluctant to tell the Port of Palm Beach how to pick an inland port site. That reluctance ended Thursday with a plea from the DEP and the Department of Transportation secretaries. They want the port to wait, and perhaps share the decision-making. The action most hurts Florida Crystals, since the local site figured to be a favorite with the local port. A rival bidder in Hendry County has a better chance with a broader review.

It would be nice to write that Mr. Cantens is wrong, that after years of tiptoeing around controversy, DEP staff members can say what they really think, even if that means stinging a powerhouse like Florida Crystals. But it's impossible to make such a leap. The DEP can't so casually shrug off its past.

In a recent column, I wrote that Palm Beach Gardens forced the removal of a homemade sign in Sandalwood Estates. The sign was in Sandalwood. Also, last week I incorrectly cited the first name of U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park.

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