

Surfers for Wetlands



What's Threatening the Florida Everglades?



What and Where are the Florida Everglades?

Stretching nearly the width of southern Florida, the Everglades, or “river of grass,” extends more than 160 kilometers from Lake Okeechobee in the north to Florida Bay to the Gulf of Mexico in the south. The Everglades consists of a mosaic of habitats: ridges of thick sawgrass separated by open water channels, or sloughs, with a scattering of tree islands that rise slightly above the surrounding grass and water.

What is Threatening the Florida Everglades?

By the late 1800s, modern civilization moved into the region and dramatically changed the face of the Everglades. Cities such as Miami and Fort Lauderdale and their associated infrastructure popped up in the east to accommodate the droves of people who wanted to enjoy southern Florida’s warm climate. Farmers created the Everglades Agricultural Area just south of Lake Okeechobee to grow sugarcane and vegetables. The federal government constructed canals to preserve farms and homes from floods the region had endured for millennia.

In the mid-1980s, scientists discovered eutrophication — the overgrowth of plant and algal species due to excess nutrients — in the normally low-nutrient ecosystem was harming the Everglades’ vegetation. The extra nutrients were allowing nutrient-loving plants like cattails to invade the wetlands and displace the sawgrass and other native plants. The phosphorus was entering the Everglades from discharge originating within Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades Agricultural Area, where farmers enriched their fields with phosphorus-heavy fertilizers.

In 1988, the federal government sued the state of Florida over the phosphorus contamination. Florida settled with the federal government and agreed to take steps to reduce phosphorus contamination in the Everglades. Agricultural interests agreed to limit the use of phosphorus fertilizer, and the state established artificial wetlands — called Stormwater Treatment Areas— on former agricultural land within the Everglades Agricultural Area to help clean the phosphorus-laden canal water before it emptied into the Everglades.

What is happening today?

Perhaps one of the most promising restoration developments in the last year was the state of Florida’s proposal to buy 73,250 hectares of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area from the U.S. Sugar Corporation at a cost of \$1.34 billion. The purchase would end agricultural practices, including the use of fertilizers, on approximately one-third of the Everglades Agricultural Area’s fields. Although not a panacea for restoring the Everglades, this plan should help reduce phosphorus and sulfate load. And someday, the acquired Everglades Agricultural Area land could eventually return to a functioning wetland, swamp or marsh.



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