



What Progress Has Been Made Towards Everglades Restoration?

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In the [last article](#), I discussed some of the well-meaning actions that were taken over decades that helped drive the deterioration of the Everglades. In this article, I will summarize some of the key initiatives that are underway to restore the Everglades, many of which are focused on undoing the harm from previous initiatives. I will also point out why, even if it appears we have made progress towards restoring the Everglades, we must remain vigilant to ensure progress is not taken away.

Key Everglades Restoration Projects

Background

Florida's Everglades are in serious trouble. Largely due to development, the Everglades are currently roughly half the size they were originally. Whereas relatively pure water used to flow from Orlando south to the Everglades, now, by the time the water reaches Lake Okeechobee, it has accumulated a high level of nutrients that can lead to outbreaks of harmful algal blooms. In addition, most of the water that leaves the lake no longer travels south the Everglades. It travels east to the Atlantic and west to the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, the Everglades are starved for water while the Caloosahatchee River and St. Lucie River are occasionally inundated with water from Lake Okeechobee that has a high level of nutrients. All of these factors have a negative impact on the Refuge.

As mentioned, one of the causes of the troubles facing the Everglades is that a number of projects to restore the Everglades had unintended consequences that were very detrimental to the Everglades. A summary of some of the primary Everglades restoration projects can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Kissimmee River Restoration

The last article described how, as part of the [Central and South Florida \(C&SF\) Project](#), the United States Congress authorized the channelization of the Kissimmee River, which resulted in significant environmental damage.

The Kissimmee River Restoration Project, which began in 1992, was a 50-50 partnership between the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, designed to undo the damage done when the river was channelized. The project re-channelized the river to replicate its natural paths. The project, which was completed in 2021, restored more than 40 square miles of the river's historic floodplain, including almost 20,000 acres of wetlands and 44 miles of historic river channel. See [more](#).





Tamiami Trail Renovation Project

In the early 1900s, the State of Florida constructed a two-lane road from Tampa to Miami called Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41). Unfortunately, the road acted as a dam that blocked water as it attempted to flow through the Everglades and into Florida Bay.

The goal of the Tamiami Trail Renovation Project is to reduce the degree to which the Tamiami Trail acts as a dam. To achieve that goal, a total of 10.7 miles of Tamiami Trail will either be replaced by a bridge or elevated.

Phase 1 of this project was completed in April of 2019 and consisted of roughly 3.3 miles of bridges being constructed. Phase 2 of the project is expected to be completed by summer 2024. This phase of the project includes building six new bridges and seven improved culverts and elevating sections of the Tamiami Trail roadway. See [more](#).

The Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM)

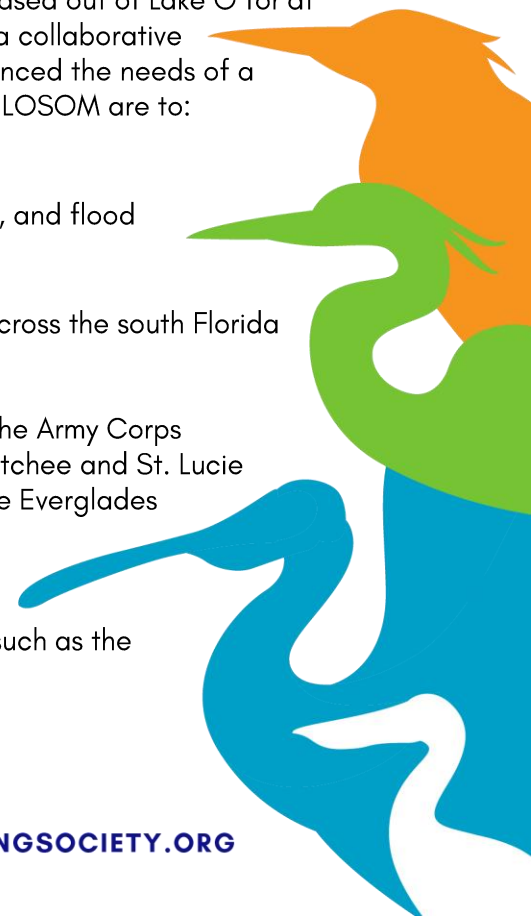
Historically, water flowed from Orlando, down the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee and then down through the Everglades to Florida Bay. However, due to a number of projects implemented over decades, today that natural flow terminates when the water reaches Lake Okeechobee. Once that happens, based in part on input from the SFWMD, the Army Corps of Engineers controls the release of water out of the lake.

When implemented, [LOSOM](#) will provide guidelines for how water is released out of Lake O for at least a decade. It was developed by the Army Corps of Engineers after a collaborative three-year process to manage releases out of Lake O in a way that balanced the needs of a broad range of stakeholders. According to the Army Corps, the goals of LOSOM are to:

- Manage risk to public health and safety, life, and property;
- Continue to meet authorized purposes for navigation, recreation, and flood control;
- Improve water supply performance;
- Enhance ecology in Lake Okeechobee, northern estuaries, and across the south Florida ecosystem.

After reviewing thousands of possible scenarios, the version of LOSOM the Army Corps recommended provides significant improvements to both the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries while tripling the amount of water that can be sent south to the Everglades and Florida Bay. See [more](#).

Unfortunately, some stakeholders want to circumvent LOSOM in order to increase the benefits they receive, even if that hurts other stakeholders such as the Refuge. One key example of this is the Florida Senate's Bill (SB) 2508.





This bill was filed in February by the Florida Senate's Appropriations Committee as a "budget conforming bill." Filing this way means a bill can be sent to the Senate floor while only allowing one chance for public comment, bypassing the typical three to four committee hearings.

One of the many negative aspects of SB 2508 was its attempt to circumvent LOSOM by requiring that agriculture gets all the water it needs, even if that hurts other stakeholders such as the Refuge. Another negative aspect of SB 2508 was that it threatened to hold up over \$300 million of funding for Everglades restoration if it didn't pass.

The "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society issued a call to action to encourage our members to write to their Florida senator and ask him to vote no on SB 2508. Our call to action was part of a fierce resistance to SB 2508 which resulted in amendments to the bill that eliminated some of the most egregious aspects of the bill.

However, even with the amendments, SB 2508 would have had a negative impact on our water resources. Thankfully, in early June, Governor DeSantis announced he would veto the bill. To see a clip of the Governor's announcement on SB 2508 see [here](#).

The fact that SB 2508 received such a positive reception in the Florida Senate affirms that the fight to restore the Everglades has been, and will continue to be, intense and ongoing.

Conclusions

It is appropriate to have cautious enthusiasm about both the Kissimmee River Restoration and the Tamiami Trail Renovation projects. The optimism comes from the fact that each project has made a significant improvement to our environment. The caution stems from the fact each project was driven by the need to make up for unintended consequences of previous projects. The desire to avoid negative unintended consequences is one of the factors that slows down some restoration projects, particularly ones that involve the use of new, innovative technologies.

In similar fashion, LOSOM is cause for celebration and for concern. LOSOM definitely improves the distribution of water out of Lake O for all of the stakeholders. However, as exemplified by SB 2508, there are groups who would like to reverse the progress made by LOSOM, and these groups have not gone away just because SB 2508 was vetoed. That means we all need to be vigilant knowing there will be future attempts to use our water resources for the good of the few at the expense of the many.

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The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the Water Resources Development Act of 2022, which will further Everglades Restoration efforts. See [more](#).

