Testimony on Everglades Restoration
Eric Eikenberg, Chief Executive Officer, The Everglades Foundation
Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
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Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito and members of the Committee, my name is Eric Eikenberg and I am privileged to be CEO of The Everglades Foundation, now celebrating its 30th anniversary of helping restore America's Everglades through science, advocacy and education.

I want to thank the Committee for this hearing focusing on the importance of ecosystem restoration being undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps), and for inviting me here today.

Restoring America's Everglades is an unmatched and vitally important ecosystem restoration effort that demonstrates how such investments can produce benefits far beyond their ecological value, including driving a clean water economy, drinking water security, flood risk mitigation (flood control) and carbon sequestration.

The Army Corps has been an indispensable partner alongside the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and the State of Florida in this undertaking.

Background:

Thanks to recent federal and state investments, we find ourselves at a time of incredible progress and momentum for Everglades restoration. The bipartisan vision of Congress, as spearheaded by my former boss, the late U.S. Representative Clay Shaw, is contained, in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), which was authorized in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2000. CERP incorporates 68 separate public works projects that, together, are a national example of how traditional and natural infrastructure can be combined on a massive scale.

The roadmap for Everglades restoration is the Integrated Delivery Schedule (IDS), a collaborative federal-state document that lays out the path to completion and funding schedule for these projects. Continuing the investment presented in the IDS is of upmost importance to complete this critical restoration effort.

These projects are funded and constructed under a national model for partnership with a 50-50 federal-state cost share. Under this partnership, both the Army Corps and the State of Florida – via SFWMD - plan, design, and build Everglades restoration projects in a coordinated and collaborative fashion. This approach of shared investment and shared responsibility garners unparalleled communication and synchronization for the partnership.

The momentum currently underway has been galvanized by recent years of historic federal and state funding, including the funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The execution of this funding is seamless given the strong and proven federal-state partnership.

We thank Congress for its recent investments and for your bipartisan recognition of the importance of America's Everglades. Recent funding decisions have closed the historical gap in funding and jump-started progress on the ground. It is imperative that we embrace this momentum and continue meeting the clearly defined IDS funding needs if we are to complete CERP.

In addition to funding, this complex program is reliant on policy in the WRDA each Congress. We thank this committee and its counterpart in the House of Representatives for returning to Regular Order in the consideration of WRDA legislation and for your support on needed policy provisions each Congress that are essential to advance this program. For WRDA 2024, we expect a handful of minor, but important, policy needs that will help advance Everglades restoration projects. We look forward to working with the Committee and all relevant parties by providing science and policy expertise to support these needs.

Restoration of America's Everglades doesn't impact Florida alone. Beyond the environmental and economic benefits to the country, best practices from Everglades restoration will be utilized in future ecosystem restoration projects. The success and completion of Everglades restoration will enhance the prominence and funding potential for restoration investment across the country.

To support this and other important ecosystem restoration projects nationally, Congress should continue to move the needle on funding for Civil Works construction, particularly aquatic ecosystem restoration. Everglades restoration is a prime example of how investments in this infrastructure can produce significant benefits and value beyond the environmental impacts.

Progress to Date:

Since 2019, 55 Everglades restoration projects or project components (both CERP and non-CERP) have broken ground, reached a significant milestone or been completed. Thanks to bipartisan investments, the Army Corps has completed several major non-CERP projects, such as restoration of the Kissimmee River, repairs to the Herbert Hoover Dike and completion of bridges along the Tamiami Trail.

In addition, progress is moving forward on a number of critical CERP projects including the massive C-44 Reservoir east of Lake Okeechobee that will store and clean basin runoff for the St. Lucie estuary. A 55,000-acre habitat restoration project in the Picayune Strand east of Naples is also nearly finished.

Ground has also been broken on the "crown jewel" of Everglades restoration, the 10,500-acre "EAA Reservoir" that will sit south of Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA). An adjacent 6,500-acre engineered wetland will soon be completed by the state.

Originally authorized in WRDA 2000, this vitally important reservoir is now on track for completion by 2030. Once constructed, the reservoir will hold an average of 120 billion

gallons of freshwater and will serve the needs of the Everglades, agriculture and the people of South Florida.

The 6,500-acre wetland, constructed by the State of Florida, is pivotal in removing nutrient pollution from the water. Prior to Congressional reauthorization in WRDA 2018, the State of Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued a Secretarial Order for inclusion into the Army Corps' Chief's Report demonstrating that non-negotiable water quality standards will be met once reservoir construction is complete.

As a mega project, we applaud the decision to use the incremental funding clause to construct the EAA Reservoir in the most prudent, efficient and safe manner possible. This will bolster its status as a banner example of our nation's commitment to invest in ecosystem restoration projects that yield significant value.

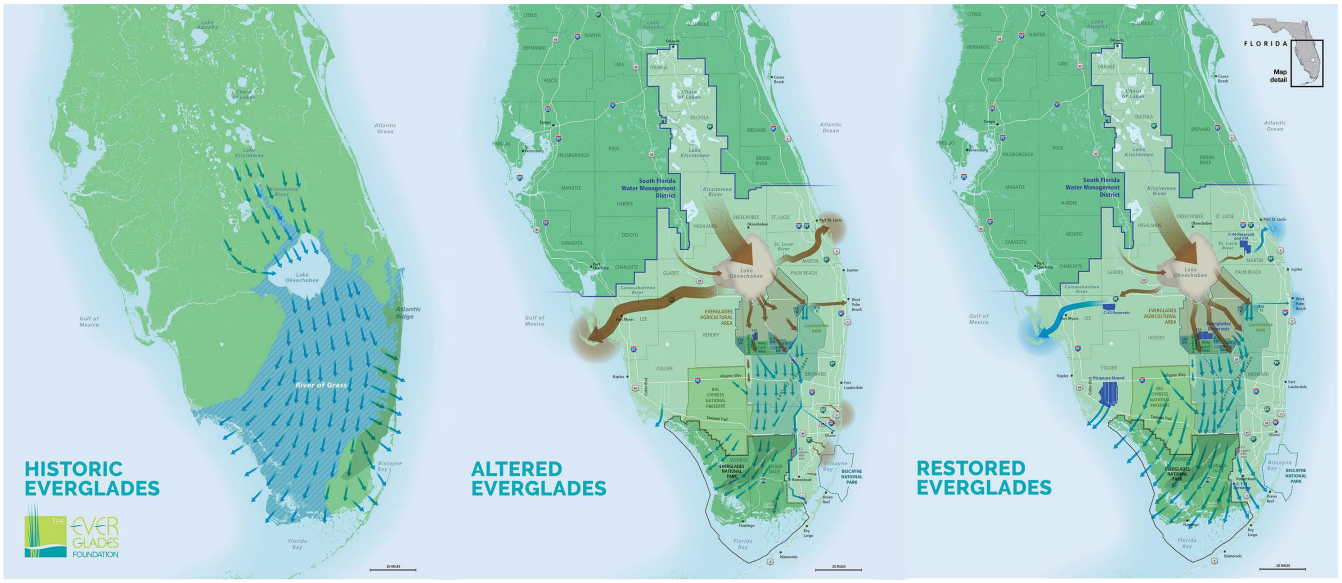
Benefits:

Everglades restoration projects provide significant benefits:

Habitat Restoration. With the improved southerly flow of water has come restoration of plant and animal species that are iconic to the Everglades. In Everglades National Park, habitats are being restored in places that, just five years ago, were parched by drought for half the year.

Reductions in Algae-Causing Discharges. Florida's coastal communities are plagued by perennial toxic blue-green algae from Lake Okeechobee. It is a noxious green slime that closes beaches, restricts fishing and is harmful to wildlife, pets and even humans. These algae blooms are fed by the unavoidable dumping of polluted water from Lake Okeechobee into the estuaries for flood control purposes.

As illustrated in the map below, alterations to the flow of water redirect 1.7 billion gallons each day away from its natural path through the Everglades and Florida Bay and instead into the coastal communities on the east and west coasts of Florida.



This phosphorus-laden water threatens Florida's "Clean Water Economy" in a 16-county region that contributes $548 billion to the state's GDP.

This clean water economy consists of real estate, tourism and outdoor recreation. Diverting algae-causing, nutrient-laden water to the coastal estuaries imposes a direct cost on the region's residents and tourists. Research shows that poor water quality reduces economic activity, decreases the value of real estate, minimizes tourism spending and harms public health.

The EAA Reservoir, complemented by the strengthened 143-mile Herbert Hoover Dike, will reduce toxic discharges by 55 percent. It will have a profound, positive impact on Florida's tourism, real estate and recreation sectors.

Further, the new Lake Okeechobee Systems Operating Manual, scheduled to be implemented later this year, will enable the Army Corps to more equitably manage Lake Okeechobee's water.

Following a thorough and transparent process with extensive public input, the Army Corps set a positive course for the next phase of Lake operations. Once implemented, it will significantly reduce harmful coastal discharges and increase the flow of much needed freshwater to the Everglades.

Strengthening Public Drinking Water Supply and Improvements to Florida Bay. The polluted water that is now being dumped into our coastal estuaries will instead be stored, cleaned and sent south to nourish America's Everglades, the source of freshwater for 9 million people.

This water will ultimately flow further south to Florida Bay. Its gin-clear waters and lush seagrass meadows makes Florida Bay the "Fishing Capital of the World," a body of water alive with manatees, dolphins and a wide variety of coveted game fish.

Today, however, Florida Bay still faces salinity challenges: not enough freshwater is flowing into the Bay.

Economic Benefits. Everglades restoration brings vital economic benefits to the nation itself.

Research shows that Everglades restoration leads to a 4:1 return on investment. This means that for every dollar we invest in restoration, we reap $4 of quantifiable economic benefits including water to drink, water for a diverse range of businesses and water for our unique ecosystems.

Additionally, restoration reduces the economic harm associated with harmful coastal algal blooms and provides global benefits by sequestering carbon year-round.

Environmental Benefits. The increased southerly flow of water will protect our aquifers from saltwater intrusion and provide necessary freshwater to Florida Bay. A restored Everglades provides a natural defense against saltwater intrusion due to sea level rise. Flowing more water south will protect our nation's largest mangrove forest.

Restoration will also protect existing peat soils in the Everglades and enhance their sequestration of new carbon. The Everglades peat soils remove and store enormous amounts of carbon from the atmosphere.

The massive size of the ecosystem points to the significance of the carbon bank it creates: Everglades National Park alone is 1.5 million acres and includes the largest protected mangrove forest in the western hemisphere; Big Cypress National Preserve, representing the heart of the Western Everglades, spans a separate 730,000 acres of cypress forest. This is in addition to 900,000 acres of state-managed Everglades marshes, sloughs and tree islands.

The peat soils across the River of Grass took centuries to accumulate, but they break down quickly when allowed to become overly dry. When they do, they release that stored carbon into the atmosphere. Restoring the Everglades will hydrate these peat soils, preventing their breakdown and the unnecessary release of excess carbon.

Everglades restoration also leverages significant value for other federal investments. From an environmental standpoint alone, a healthy Everglades ecosystem, including Everglades National Park has positive impacts on Biscayne Bay National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

The Everglades is home to 78 threatened or endangered species, contains 14 national wildlife refuges and 4 national parks including Everglades National Park – a UNESCO World Heritage Site, International Biosphere Reserve and Wetland of International Importance.

Don’t Stop Now.

Everglades restoration is now at a critical juncture. With sustained funding, this can be the “Everglades Decade,” in which we achieve the decades-long dream of a robust, healthy Everglades after a century of development.

Finally, the current Fiscal Year 2023 federal commitment to this work, $447 million, supports ***$548 billion*** in economic activity across the 16 counties of South Florida. This is an area where reductions in non-defense discretionary spending would have a serious consequential impact on the economy and the environment of the nation's third largest state.

Senators, you should be proud of the bipartisan progress in restoring America’s Everglades. On behalf of the anglers, the realtors, the fishing guides, the business owners, and the millions who depend on and love the Everglades, let me say thank you -- and please, do not stop now.

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