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Witnesses Question Obama Administration's Priorities on Everglades Restoration

Proposed Land Acquisition Would Hurt Local Economies, Restrict Recreational Access

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs held an [oversight hearing](#) on, “*Florida Everglades Restoration: What are the Priorities?*” The hearing focused on how the Obama Administration’s proposed establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area will contribute to the overall goal of restoring the Florida Everglades.

“Since 2001, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District have dedicated themselves to the Comprehensive Everglades Management Plan. This project, which is the largest in our history, is designed to restore the Florida Everglades by improving water quality, removing phosphorus and other contaminants and ‘getting the water right.’ Together, the federal government and the State of Florida have pledged some \$14 billion to complete 68 projects - the vast majority of which are occurring south of Lake Okeechobee. It is in this context that earlier this year, the Secretary of the Interior announced his intention to establish a 150,000 acre National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area north of Lake Okeechobee,” said Subcommittee Chairman John Fleming (LA-04). “In addition to the more than \$700 million it will cost our taxpayers to buy these Florida lands and easements, there are additional consequences. For instance, the Service has freely admitted that there are at least sixty major development projects in the Everglades Landscape that are either in initial stages or have been approved. When the economy improves, those projects are likely to proceed. What the Service fails to tell the American people is how many thousands of new jobs will be lost by locking up this land to no development in the future.”

“The Florida Everglades is one of our nation’s greatest natural treasures. The Everglades’ combination of abundant moisture, rich soils, and subtropical temperatures support a vast array of species. However, flood control and reclamation efforts of the past have manipulated the Everglades hydrology, redirecting freshwater destined for the Everglades out to sea. The ecosystem has changed because it now receives less water during the dry season and more during the rainy season. The projects under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program will capture freshwater - the lifeblood of the Everglades - destined for the sea and direct it back to the ecosystem to revitalize it and protect threatened and endangered plants and wildlife. However, while I generally support the Everglades Headwaters project, I believe that only Congress may authorize a new refuge and therefore encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to draft legislation that can be introduced in Congress, either by myself,

another Committee member, or one of my Florida colleagues, so we can use it as a base to modify, codify and address concerns raised by stakeholders, including allowing state agencies to access the refuge for flood mitigation and pollutant control. With Congressional authorization, any agreements entered into with hunters, ranchers, airboat operators and others will also be set in stone,” **said Congressman David Rivera (FL-25).**

The Florida Everglades, consisting of 2.5 million acres throughout Central and Southern Florida, is one of the largest freshwater marshes in the world. In 2000, Congress enacted the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) as a component of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), committing to work with the State of Florida to spend at least \$13.5 billion for the restoration of the Florida Everglades.

The objective of CERP is to revive the Everglades by providing sufficient water quantities into the system, restoring water quality, and moving the water through the system at the right time. Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) released a proposal to establish a 150,000 acre Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area north of Lake Okeechobee through conservation easements and land acquisition for inclusion within the National Wildlife Refuge System. FWS plans to purchase the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area at a cost upwards of \$700 million despite the fact that the Fish and Wildlife Service has an operations and maintenance backlog in excess of \$3.4 billion.

According to [**Mr. William Horn**](#), **a former member of the National Academy of Science’s Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress**, the proposed refuge overlays areas already managed by Florida state programs, wasting federal funds that would be better used on other projects. *“I am persuaded that more commitment to water storage and water quality treatment, south of Lake Okeechobee, and elimination of physical barriers to natural water flows within the Everglades, are much higher priorities for Everglades restoration than diversion of finite resources, dollars and personnel, to a new refuge unit north of the Lake. Moreover, the State of Florida has already enacted programs directed at conservation, including water quality improvement, of the Lake Okeechobee headwaters region. There is no indication that a federally directed conservation effort (i.e., a new refuge) will be superior to the State-directed conservation program.”* Horn continued, *“That raises issues worthy of scrutiny: what additional benefits, if any, are provided by the establishment of new federal refuge unit in this area already the focus of State conservation programs? Are the incremental benefits that might arise from the refuge worth the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars for federal land acquisition?”*

[**Mr. Bishop Wright, Jr.**](#), **President of the Florida Airboat Association**, voiced sportsmen’s concern that the proposed acquisition by the Federal Government will result in severely restricted access to the lands. *“As of right now we have 28 refuges in the state and only 7 allow hunting. Out of those 28 refuges, there is no valid reason at all that we can find for them not to allow hunting on at least 5 more refuges immediately, so this new refuge they are proposing we can only believe will be off limits also. No matter what they promise, Floridian hunters and sportsmen cannot allow the Federal government to lock up any more land.”*

Locking up lands north of Lake Okeechobee provides no guarantee water quality will

improve in the Everglades, puts the economic prosperity of the surrounding communities at risk by restricting development, removes a source of revenue for local counties, and has the potential to lock-up the land for public access and wildlife dependent recreation.

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