

EPA Gives OK to \$880M Everglades Clean-Up Plan

MATT SEDENSKY, Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — An \$880 million plan to improve Everglades water quality was given federal approval Wednesday, setting the clock on a massive 12-year cleanup project.

The Environmental Protection Agency approved permits for the proposal, saying its completion "would represent a significant and historic milestone in restoring America's Everglades."

The Everglades are a key water source for millions of South Florida residents, but the Everglades have been damaged for decades by the intrusion of farms and development. Dikes, dams and canals have been cut, effectively draining much of the swamp and polluting it with fertilizers and urban runoff.

The state and federal governments' efforts to restore the wetlands have been stymied for years by funding shortfalls, legal challenges and political bickering.

The federal approval came just over a week after the latest plan was submitted by the South Florida Water Management District, the lead state agency on Everglades restoration efforts.

It pulls together pieces of plans proposed last year by the EPA and the state Department of Environmental Protection and sets the stage for the ultimate resolution of lawsuits dating back to 1988 over enforcement of Clean Water Act standards in the vast wetlands area.

In a letter approving the project, Gwen Keyes Fleming, the EPA's regional administrator, said she believed the plan would satisfy judges as a remedy to the lawsuits.

Though state funding and the actual construction remain significant hurdles, the approval outlines a specific action, which has been haggled over for years between the state and federal governments.

"It wraps up almost a decade of arguing over what the best thing to do is," said Julie Hill-Gabriel, director of Everglades policy for Audubon Florida. "This, at the very least, is an agreement that these are the right steps to move forward and sets very stringent deadlines."

The project will construct stormwater treatment areas and issue permits for the operation of tens of thousands of acres of already built ones. It will also create new water storage areas. All of it is an effort to filter phosphorous, which comes from fertilizer and promotes the growth of unhealthy vegetation that chokes native plants.

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Backers of projects to restore the ecosystem have emphasized the financial impact.

"A healthy Everglades is vital to the well-being of Florida and contributes jobs and billions of dollars to Florida's economy," Keyes Fleming said.

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