

Successful project between agencies helps the citizens, wildlife and environment
by: Corine Burgess

In this day and age of a volatile economy, stimulus packages and corruption on Wall Street, it may be hard to imagine a project between numerous governmental agencies that is a complete success. According to Clell Ford, Project Manager for the Arbuckle Creek Levee undertaking, it would be tough to find a project comparable to this one. "Of all the projects in South Florida, it would be hard to find one that restores this many acre feet of water storage for this low price."

It all started back in the late 60's when concern for the Arbuckle Marsh and the wildlife that lived there became an issue. There had been so much alteration up and down the watershed, between private lands and development, that the water regime was being changed and the area began to dry up. Being a very unique wetland, which is very important to the watershed functionality, something had to be done. This area is distinctive because it is both an inflow and a basin marsh. The marsh is fed by Tomlin Gulley Creek on the southeast portion and Morgan Hole Creek from the north. It is bordered on the west side by Arbuckle Creek, which when flooded backflows into the marsh.

It was decided that a dyke was needed on the west and south perimeter to hold water and then allow it to flow back and drain out to simulate the natural regime. This marked the first moment that the Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resource Conservation Service) became involved in a partnership at the Avon Park Air Force Range. The Soil Conservation Service staff designed the dyke for the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, who were managing the land at that time, and thus the project began. The original dyke was constructed of materials, mostly muck, that was available on the site and easily degradable.

In 1983, due to a change in Air Force and Department of Defense policy, the bombing range personnel took over the supervision of wildlife management on the military installation. Staff immediately started looking at the dyke situation and became concerned that it had degraded and was not functioning very well. Initially, the thought process was to take the dyke out and let nature take its course. Contact was made with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), who provides for control of the surface water flow, and they had concerns about possible flooding if the dyke was removed. With the dyke gone, surface flow would increase which would have impacted private land owners to the south.

As fate would have it, some years later Air Force personnel were approached by SFWMD, who wanted to partner with them to provide on site retention of storm water. Public and private entities were being sought out to use their land to hold back water and slow down nutrient flow into Lake Okeechobee. This would later be named the Lake Okeechobee Restoration Program.

It was a perfect fit. The problem of the degraded dyke solved, now all that was needed was to find a partner who could manage the project and help with the administration of funds. Because of the long and successful history of working with the Soil Conservation Service, who had become the Natural Resource Conservation Service and a partner of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD), they were approached to assist with the new project.

Accepting the opportunity to help restore the area, HSWCD got to work. The project received its funding from the SFWMD through a local government agreement with the HSWCD. The construction contract of the project was awarded to Envrio-Tech Systems of Okeechobee. The project entailed re-construction of the Arbuckle Marsh levee to an elevation of 57' mean sea level and installation of four extensions to existing culverts along the length of the levee.

The dyke holds back up to 10,000 acre feet of water from depths of 0 to 4 feet. Approximately 100,000 cubic yards of material was used to restore a two and a half mile area of degraded dyke. The project was completed in July of 2009, and took only 5 months from beginning to end. It was done within the timeframe and budget allotted. Crews worked 7 days a week to get the project done. The area is now rich with wildlife including water fowl and alligators as well as miles of saw grass and other important wetland plants. According to Paul Ebersbach, Chief of Environmental Flight at the Air Force Range, "all results exceeded expectations."

Seeing our tax payer dollars being used in such an efficient way, knowing that different governmental agencies can and do work well together toward a common goal and that our environment is being restored and protected may help to give us all hope toward a better tomorrow.