

The River of Grass gets a much needed helping hand
By: Corine Burgess

There is no place on earth quite like the Everglades. Once commonly called the River of Grass, the area was historically a pristine marsh filled with sawgrass, teeming with countless species of flora and fauna. Because of the unique mixture of salt and fresh water, it is the only place on the planet that houses both crocodiles and alligators. Weaving throughout this unique community are numerous freshwater ponds, uplands and prairies.

In the early 1900's, parts of the Everglades were drained to support agriculture and development. As more people moved to the area, flooding became problematic to residents since it was previously a wetland. As a result, the water was channeled to other areas via canals, levees and water control structures.

As we have learned throughout history, when mankind changes the natural cycle, ecosystems become unbalanced. Because of the loss of water to the area, fish, wading birds, alligators, invertebrates and many other species began to disappear. In addition, development, local farms and the changing of the water's natural flow caused the once pristine wetland's makeup to change. Algae and exotic species began to take the place of native plants, which in turn reduced the amount of cover and forage for the native animals that remained.

Fortunately, partnerships between governmental agencies, local landowners and non-governmental organizations have formed in an effort to restore wetlands in areas that have been compromised. The Northern Everglades Restoration Project is one such program.

On July 19, 2010, a group of people got together to announce one of the largest wetland restoration projects in history. Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Kathleen Merrigan, Deputy Secretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Senator Bill Nelson, Congressman Adam H. Putnam, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' (FDACS) Commissioner Charles Bronson, Keith Fountain, Director of Protection for The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Governing Board Member of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Kevin Powers, and four local landowners, whose property covers five contiguous tracts of land throughout the area, formed a partnership for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

The WRP is a voluntary program which provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to restore, protect and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring eligible land from agriculture. The program offers landowners an opportunity to establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection. According to USDA's Deputy Secretary, Kathleen Merrigan, "This is one of the last frontiers for large-scale land conservation in Florida." The land that is being restored is within the Fisheating Creek area of the Northern Everglades watershed. For NRCS, the goal is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat on every acre enrolled in the program. The partnering agencies, TNC and SFWMD, will assist NRCS with easement acquisitions and wetland restoration

planning and monitoring. The easements will encompass 26,000 acres of land, with a cost of approximately \$89 million.

The adjoining natural areas along the region's creeks and rivers, cattle ranches and conservation lands provide necessary food, space and connectivity to support animals such as the Florida Black Bear, Florida Panther and the Whooping Crane. According to Carlos Torres, NRCS District Conservationist for the Sebring field office, this WRP site supports 19 threatened and endangered species. Once the land is fully restored, the wetlands and water quality will be enhanced and improved. Once again, wildlife will flourish and reproduce in the area. With programs such as this one, perhaps one day our children will be able to take their children to marvel at the beauty of the "River of Grass."