

**Minutes – Florida Keys and South Florida Ecosystem Connectivity Team Meeting #15
March 19, 2024**

Attendees: Karen Bohnsack, Jerry Lorenz, Shelly Krueger, Phanor Montoya-Maya, Suzy Roebling, Erinn Muller, Kelly Cox, Paul Julian, Adam Gelber, Steve Blackburn, Nick Parr, Chris Madden, Marisa Carrozzo, Mia McCormick, Sarah Barmeyer, Cheryl Swaby, Robyn Blevins, Vanessa T., Marcello Balladeras, and James Tobias

Guest speakers: Kathy Burchett and Beth Alvi

Absent: Cara Capp, Steve Davis, Mike Goldberg, Matt Semcheski, Luke McEachron, Tylan Dean, Steve Friedman, Raechel Littman, Emma Haydocy, Chris Bergh, Gina Ralph, Will Benson.

Action Items:

- Invite Matt Kendall (NOAA) to present to this Team about his work within the 10,000 Islands and juvenile fish populations.
- Invite Nick Parr to talk about the new aquatic preserve at the Kristin Jacobs ECA. Passed House and Senate but not yet signed by Governor. Nick will see if the current ECA manager can come talk to our Team.
- Keep smalltooth sawfish and spinning fish on our radar to address at future meeting once more information is available

Note to members: The S. Fl Ecosystem Restoration Task Force meeting is tomorrow and Matt Kendall is providing data about how freshwater flows may impact fish species. Link to meeting tomorrow, which will also include coral bleaching and 2023 marine heatwave:

<https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/working-group/mar-20-2024-working-group-science-coordination-group-meeting-mar202024> and registration link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3GI0v1MoQVeMyWCt4E-CtA#/registration

Agenda, March 19, 2024:

Welcome, Introductions, Administrative Items

Jerry Lorenz called the meeting to order at 10:03 am. Welcome remarks by Jerry Lorenz and mission of the Florida Keys and South Florida Ecosystem Connectivity Team (“Team”). Karen Bohnsack captured roll call. Karen outlined Google Meet platform and the control buttons and features. Public comment will be after presentations and will have 3 minutes.

Joe Weatherby was a founding member and valued member of this group and unfortunately passed away on February 13, 2024. Joe will be missed.

New member representation. Welcome to new member Phanor Montoya-Maya with Coral Restoration Foundation as the new coral restoration representative (replacing Amelia Moura on the Team). Phanor replaced Jessica Levy as the CRF Restoration Program Manager; he has a PhD in coral reef connectivity.

Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area - *Kathy Burchett, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will present on the proposal to establish an Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area in Southwest Florida that would improve habitat connectivity and climate resilience for the Greater Everglades.*

US Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) response to climate change and Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area, refuge supervisor for USFWS. Kathy discussed the Land acquisition planning roadmap from 1) conceptual idea, 2) preliminary planning, 3) detailed planning (NEPA stage) and 4) refuge establishment or expansion. Refuge units are established in response to resource threats and ecological possibilities for conservation protection. Florida experiences high pressure from human development, nutrient enrichment, and SLR are natural resource threats in Florida.

Phase 1 (June 2022): Landscape conservation design. Looked at almost 7 million acres (June 2022) in Greater Everglades, Mayakka River, Fisheating Creek, Caloosahatchee River, Peace River watersheds all adjacent to Everglades headwaters NWR and conservation area (CA). There were 171 attendees at scoping meetings in Spring 2023 with 2,600 widely supportive public comments.

Phase 2: draft land protection plan and environmental assessment (EA). Identified goals and objectives. Acquisition fee title or easement. Environmental impact statement (EIS) for physical, biological, socioeconomic, and cultural resources. The Florida Wildlife Corridor is essential for species adaptation. The area went from 7 million acres down to 4 million acres and up to 10% fee title due to the exclusion of tribal lands because they have their own management plans. Boundary of proposed Conservation Area (CA) includes Everglades restoration project areas, influences water quantity, timing, and quality into and out of Lake O. Influences Gulf and Everglades (Charlotte Harbor, Caloosahatchee and Fisheating Creek). Provides important wildlife connectivity.

Ecological priorities: critical lands and waters identification project, Florida ecological greenway network, 12 different models, evident high priority corridor, important riparian areas. Protection potential = 3,379,636 acres.

1,000 to 1,200 people are moving to Florida every day = 1 Miami every year. Development increases nutrient pollution, habitat loss, road enhancements and higher density developments. CO2 increased to 417 ppm, 50% greater than 1850.

Public outreach for draft land protection plan (LPP) and EA: news release to 300 media outlets, email lists, Telemundo, 4 public meetings, 35-day comment period, and over 3,000 comments and only 1 was potentially negative due to possible changes to property values. Overwhelmingly supportive public comments. 700 were individually written letters and not NGO form letters.

Size of CA increased to 4,045,268 areas and fee title acreage increased to 404,526 acres. This conservation plan requires many partners to preserve these areas.

March 5, 2024 announced Everglades to Gulf Conservation Area established in the footprint of SW Florida. This will allow an opportunity to work for FWS to work with partners on conservation, and will increase wetland storage, protect land, restore wetlands, reduce nutrient deposition into waterways, and improve water quality. For more information go to: <https://www.fws.gov/project/everglades-gulf-conservation-area>.

Discussion and Q&A:

Q: Regarding easements and fee titles, what is the funding situation?

A: Predominantly funding through Land Water Conservation Fund (LWC Fund); this is nationally competitive and we are fortunate it has been fully funded the last several years. Property is also acquired through mitigation, donations, etc.

Q: How many landowners would be affected?

A: Nothing changes about a landowners' ownership within the CA, except if they are a willing seller, they can do a conservation easement or sell outright (DOI/FWS is eligible to acquire it because the land is now in an established boundary). Most landowners not affected. NRCS has wetland reserve programs popular with agricultural communities, which gives extra credits for those land areas adjacent to ecological areas.

Q: Was there any pushback to this?

A: No. The development and realty companies responded favorably, as they understand wise development is good for all of us. Some people were concerned about tax rolls, but easements do not remove land from the tax rolls. Usually, the federal gov reimburses counties for fee title situations.

Many thanks for Kathy for all of her work and looking forward to working with her and the team on this new CA.

Florida State Legislative Update - *Beth Alvi, Audubon Florida will provide an update on relevant policies and funding opportunities under consideration by state lawmakers during Florida's legislative session. Beth.alvi@audubon.org*

Presentation from Beth Alvi, director of policy at Audubon Florida. Addressing a subset of relevant bills to this group. Usually follow 40-50 bills annually. Budget for Everglades CERP \$550,000,000. Northern Everglades Estuaries Protection Plan (NEEP) \$71,516,213. Transfer to Everglades Trust Fund \$64M, Dispersed storage \$5M, Lake O watershed restoration plan \$50M, and Operation and Maintenance for SFWMD \$150M.

Florida Legislature understanding importance of healthy and robust coral reefs. \$8M for coral reef restoration and protection and \$9.5M for the coral reef restoration and recovery initiative. Multiple slides about amounts allocated for legislative mandates and water quality.

Bills that passed but have not been signed by Governor yet

- HB 1049: flood disclosure in the sale of real property. Buyers must be informed of previous flood damage, if you have flood insurance, and if there have been any claims, including FEMA claims. Residential property only and does not apply to rental properties.
- HB 321: release of balloons. Prohibits intentional release of balloons. Fines under litter laws. Exempts 6 years of age and younger.
- HB 1557: DEP Bill reclaimed water/resiliency. Reclaimed water must be treated to higher AWT standards, establishes Kristin Jacobs ECA as a new aquatic preserve, expands regional entities eligible for funding from resiliency funds, et al.
- SB 1638 Funding for environmental resource management. \$100M for Florida Wildlife Corridor, \$100M for invasives removal, et al.
- SB 7040 Stormwater rule ratification. Provides more treatment and cleaner water entering waterways.
- HB 1073 Mitigation. Net improvement standards of stormwater rule could be met. For ERP permits -- needed options for outside treatment projects to be located outside of the permit location to offset the disturbance. Allows mitigation banks to be located on local governments mitigation areas. Defined credit deficient basins.
- HB 165 Sampling of beach waters and public bathing spaces. Clarifies Department of Health is responsible and that counties and municipalities must notify DoH within 24h of bacterial indicators in the water and DoH must provide the signage.

Bills that did not pass:

- HB 1581 Mangrove replanting and restoration to determine value of mangroves in flood reduction, insurance premiums, et al.
- SB 1364 Everglades Protection Area. Requires that when there are any changes to any entities (county, municipality) comprehensive plan, it must include how to reduce that conflict if the land area is within a 2-mile boundary of the Everglades Protection Area. This requires a longer process and not the expedited process.

Concerning Bills that did not pass

SB 738 Environmental Management.

SB 1210 Estero Bay. Would have revised the boundaries of the first aquatic preserve. Was removing a large area of the AP for dredging a 300 slip marina.

HB 1221 Land Use and Development

SB 298 Coastal Construction and Assessments. Would prohibit local governments having codes and ordinances that were stricter than state law.

SB 1620 Surplus Lands.

Concerning Bills that Passed

- HB 632 Taking of Bears.
- HB 1645 Energy Policy. Prohibits wind energy in Florida waters.

Discussion and Q&A:

Q: Is current Everglades funding for upcoming year more than usual?

A: About average. Been using more general revenue since COVID. This level of funding is a little bit less than usual.

Q: HAB funding was \$5M. Innovative water quality was \$26M, can any of that go towards algal bloom funding? Lake O releases have already started this year.

A: The HAB funding is for immediate response to red tide, etc. Innovative WQ and the other program is more long-term but can be used for some innovative technologies and the websites where WQ information is housed.

Q: WQ improvement funding. Who decides where that money goes?

A: Primarily DEP decides and some require matching funds. There is a lot of flexibility in how these funds can be used. Sewer, AWT, homeowner connections...

Q: \$150M for SFWMD is for infrastructure, and operations and maintenance (O and M)?

A: Yes.

Public Comment – N/A

Team Member Updates

Shelly: Smalltooth sawfish deaths and spinning fish. Unknown at the moment what is the causation. Gaining national media. Samples are being sent to FWC, FGCU, and the University of South Alabama for testing.

Action Item: Keep smalltooth sawfish and spinning fish in our radar to address at future meeting once more information is available

Karen: The S. Fl Ecosystem Restoration Task Force meeting is tomorrow and Matt Kendall is providing data about how restored freshwater flows to the southwest coast may impact fish populations. Link to meeting tomorrow, which will also include coral bleaching and 2023 marine heatwave: <https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/working-group/mar-20-2024-working-group-science-coordination-group-meeting-mar202024> and registration link: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3GI0v1MoQVeMyWCt4E-CtA#/registration

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Note: Next SAC Meeting April 16, 2024 and does anyone want to add an item to the SAC agenda. Nothing currently for this meeting and likely do not need time re: info from this Team.

Jerry Lorenz adjourned the meeting at 11:35.