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**DEP SECRETARY PARTICIPATES IN LAKE OKEECHOBEE FORUM**

*--Florida's environmental leader discusses progress in Lake Okeechobee restoration --*

**BELLE GLADE**— Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Secretary Michael W. Sole participated in a facilitated dialogue among federal and state officials and local civic leaders today at the Lake Okeechobee Decision Makers forum. DEP Secretary Sole emphasized the need for cooperation at the state, local and federal levels to continue the progress restoring Lake Okeechobee, the heart of America's Everglades.

"Florida is committed to improving the water quality in Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades," said DEP Secretary Sole. "Since 2000, Florida has invested more than \$100 million to improve farming practices, construct treatment wetlands and implement phosphorus reduction technologies to improve the health of America's second largest freshwater lake."

DEP Secretary Sole highlighted the importance of implementing restoration projects using adaptive management to continue progress in restoration. He emphasized that taking the steps to complete these projects is crucial to restoration and that while it may be necessary to adapt plans as new data becomes available, it is crucial restoration efforts not be delayed.

The state of Florida recognized the importance of the Northern Everglades in June 2007 by passing the Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program, which expands the Lake Okeechobee Protection Program to safeguard and restore the entire northern Everglades system and calls for the development of far-reaching plans to protect and improve the quality, quantity, timing and distribution of water north of Lake Okeechobee. Required by the legislation, the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Construction Project Phase II Technical Plan, developed by DEP, the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is a critical step in Everglades restoration, and will be submitted to the Florida Legislature next month.

Demonstrating its continued commitment to restoring America's Everglades, Florida's 2007-08 budget signed by Governor Crist includes \$200 million for the restoration and protection of the South Florida ecosystem, specifically allocating \$54 million for the restoration of Lake Okeechobee as well as \$40 million to protect the health of the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Florida has taken the lead in implementing the 30-year, \$10.9 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). To date, Florida has committed \$2.4 billion toward the 50-50 state/federal cost-share, which covers 16 counties over an 18,000 square mile area. Restoring America's Everglades is reviving habitat for more than 60 threatened and endangered species, establishing a reliable supply of water for millions of Floridians and providing flood control consistent with the restoration.

The Lake Okeechobee Decision Makers Forum is a facilitated dialogue among federal and state officials and local civic leaders to discuss restoration of the Lake. Participants examined the challenges presented by the multiple roles the lake is asked to fulfill, identified unanticipated impacts of management decisions on the communities surrounding the lake and avenues of cooperation, and listened to new ideas. The Forum follows on the heels of last week's Everglades Coalition Conference, where Secretary Sole and Florida's environmental leaders reaffirmed their commitment to restoring the South Florida ecosystem.

For more information on the Lake Okeechobee Decision Makers Forum, visit <http://www.ces.fau.edu/dmf/>. For more information on Florida's Everglades restoration efforts, visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/secretary/everglades/default.htm>.