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State Releases 2008 South Florida Environmental Report

--Annual report marks tenth year of unified reporting by DEP and SFWMD; highlights progress to restore the South Florida ecosystem--

WEST PALM BEACH - The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) today released the 2008 South Florida Environmental Report detailing a year of scientific, engineering and restoration work to improve the environmental quality of America's Everglades and the entire South Florida ecosystem.

Spanning two comprehensive volumes and comprising more than 50 individual reports, the 2008 report marks the tenth year of unified, streamlined environmental reporting by the two agencies. The report provides extensive research summaries, data analyses, financial updates and a searchable database of environmental projects throughout the Everglades, Kissimmee Basin, Lake Okeechobee, and South Florida's estuaries and coastal areas. The report covers the 2007 Water Year, which is May 1, 2006 to April 31, 2007.

"Despite the hardships associated with a severe regional water shortage, low water levels provided unique opportunities for environmental restoration over the past year," said DEP Secretary Michael W. Sole. "This report captures the cutting-edge science behind the efforts, as well as the hard work of dedicated State of Florida employees."

Key findings in the 2008 South Florida Environmental Report include:

- Phosphorus source-control programs continue to meet expectations. Since 1994, South Florida's six stormwater treatment areas (STAs), together with farming best management practices in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) have prevented nearly 2,700 metric tons of phosphorus from entering the southern Everglades.
- During Water Year 2007, South Florida's 45,000 acres of treatment wetlands captured more than 900,000 acre-feet of Everglades-bound water and retained 153 metric tons of phosphorous, reducing phosphorous inflows to the Everglades by 71 percent. EAA best management practices

reduced phosphorus inputs to the Everglades for the 12th consecutive year.

- Regional efforts to control exotic species continued in an aggressive fashion. In early 2007, an accelerated invasive plant management program was implemented in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Biological agents were released to control the spread of melaleuca and Old World Climbing Fern (*Lygodium*), as well as the Mexican bromeliad weevil. In all, 11,800 acres of the two invasive plants have been treated aerially, and 7,120 acres have been ground-treated across South Florida.
- The state's Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program was launched to complement the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. It includes projects that will benefit Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and estuaries.
- The state's *Acceler8* initiative continues to expedite key Everglades restoration projects, including construction of the 190,000 acre-foot EAA Reservoir to provide restoration benefits to Lake Okeechobee, its adjoining estuaries, and the southern Everglades.
- In a continuing partnership between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the SFWMD, Phase I restoration of the Kissimmee River has successfully reconnected 15 miles of former river channel to its floodplain. Completed in September 2007, backfilling of an additional 1.9 miles of canal re-established flow in four new miles of river channel and allowed inundation of 155 additional acres of floodplain wetlands.
- The District and its partners continue efforts to establish freshwater inflows that will protect and restore South Florida's coastal ecosystems. The Minimum Flow and Level Rule for Florida Bay was adopted, and interactions of freshwater inflows and salinity were studied for the Loxahatchee River and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries. Science planning also was initiated for all the District's priority coastal systems.

South Florida faced a severe water shortage during Water Year 2007, with a regional rainfall deficit of more than a foot relative to historic averages. Low rainfall resulted in significant reductions in region-wide water levels, as well as reduced flows across the entire water management system.

The 2007 water shortage conditions were most pronounced in Lake Okeechobee, where water levels reached an all-time record low of 8.82 feet above sea level on

July 2, 2007. Nevertheless, low water levels provided unique opportunities for lake management and restoration. During the summer of 2007, approximately two million cubic yards of muck were removed from 2,000 acres of shoreline in Lake Okeechobee. This dredging is expected to restore habitat for submerged aquatic vegetation and native plants and wildlife, with an ancillary benefit of removing about 237 metric tons of phosphorus from the lake.

“The comprehensive data captured in the 2008 South Florida Environmental Report supports prudent environmental decision-making and represents the scientific basis for our agencies’ environmental initiatives,” added Carol Wehle, Executive Director of the SFWMD. “It documents and demonstrates Florida’s commitment to restoration.”

The State of Florida, the Florida Legislature and the South Florida Water Management District have invested more than \$2.4 billion toward the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, the 50-50 state and federal partnership to restore, protect and preserve the water resources of central and southern Florida. An additional \$1.8 billion has been invested by the state in Everglades water quality improvements, with \$250 million committed to the Lake Okeechobee and Estuary Recovery Plan and the Northern Everglades Initiative.

The 2008 South Florida Environmental Report, including a 52-page executive summary, is available online at <http://www.sfwmd.gov/sfer>.