

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP



The Kissimmee River Restoration Project in Florida

USACE

Everglades Restoration

Massive project provides fresh water for residents, wildlife

By Robin Roenker

IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN Florida, the Army Corps of Engineers is in the midst of "the largest aquatic ecosystem restoration program in the world," said Col. Andrew Kelly, commander and district engineer of the Corps' Jacksonville District.

Spanning more than 18,000 square miles, the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration program (SFER), a suite of projects managed by the Corps and the state of Florida, encompasses the Kissimmee River Basin near Orlando south

to Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades National Park and Florida Bay. "We are contributing directly to the restoration of two national parks (Everglades National Park and Biscayne National Park)," said Howie Gonzales, chief of the Jacksonville District's ecosystem branch. "It's ultimately a landscape that is like nowhere else on the planet."

Begun in the 1990s and designed to improve the water flow and ecological health of some 2.4 million acres, including some of Florida's most diverse natural

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The Kissimmee River restored to its natural flow



The former C-38 canal with the Kissimmee River, right

habitats, the Corps estimates the multifaceted SFER initiative won't be completed for another 20 to 30 years. By then, countless hours and more than \$15 billion will have been invested with one goal in mind: delivering clean water to native ecosystems and Florida residents.

The project is "meant to address the quantity of water and the quality of water — making sure we're keeping the fresh water in the system and not losing it to tides," explained Gonzales.

Within the next two years, the Corps is aiming to complete several central SFER components, including shoring up the aging Herbert Hoover Dike — a 143-mile earthen dam surrounding Lake Okeechobee. Additional work will improve the flow of canals and estuaries surrounding the lake and establish new water storage reservoirs that will allow the Corps and its partners to manage flood control, as well as perfect the timing of fresh water delivery in the region.

In the northernmost section, the Kissimmee River Restoration Project — expected to be finished in the next year — will be one of the most tangible and successful modifications completed. Since 1999, Corps teams have been working to re-create the original natural meandering flow of the river, portions of which had been replaced in the 1960s by the 56-mile-long, 300-foot-wide, C-38 canal, a sort of "water super highway," Gonzales said.

"As we got into the 1990s, there was a realization that the ways the Kissimmee River had been manipulated to form a large, straight, deep-cut canal were having significant negative impacts on the environment," Gonzales said. "The amount of native birds, native wildlife and native vegetation were all declining significantly."

Fast forward to today, with water winding slowly and naturally from the Kissimmee River basin to Lake Okeechobee. "We've done a wonderful job creating a natural environment, reminiscent of the way it used to be — where the river bends and flows and has a wide flood plain," Kelly said. "We've seen a huge resurgence of natural ecosystems."