



Modified Waters and Raising Tamiami Trail: A Key to Everglades Restoration

Historically, the Everglades delivered freshwater south from Lake Okeechobee in a slow uninterrupted movement called sheetflow. To enable urban development and agriculture in the area, the sheetflow was cut off, the water drained, and replaced by a complex system of controlled canals and ditches. The ecosystem and the wildlife that rely on it suffered greatly, and restoration efforts underway seek to reconnect the vital characteristics of the historic Everglades. We must work quickly and diligently to move forward and raise Tamiami Trail, laying the groundwork for a restored Southern Everglades.

One Everglades restoration project that is truly essential to realizing ecological benefits is called Modified Water Deliveries to Everglades National Park (Mod Waters). The goal of Mod Waters, approved by Congress in 1989, is to re-establish the historic sheetflow of freshwater from the Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, because the Tamiami Trail currently acts as a dam blocking this flow. The key to achieving this goal is construction of a one mile bridge over the Tamiami Trail that will re-establish flows concentrated in the historic heart of flow within Everglades National Park- Northeast Shark River Slough.

The National Research Council (NRC), in its 2008 report on Everglades restoration, noted that “Everglades restoration is at a crossroads: completion of the Mod Waters project would put in place a cornerstone for CERP, while failure to implement Mod Waters will delay critical components of the CERP and allow the Everglades ecosystem to continue to degrade.”¹



*Tamiami Trail © Robert V. Sobczak,
Big Cypress National Preserve Hydrologist*

Mod Waters has three major components:

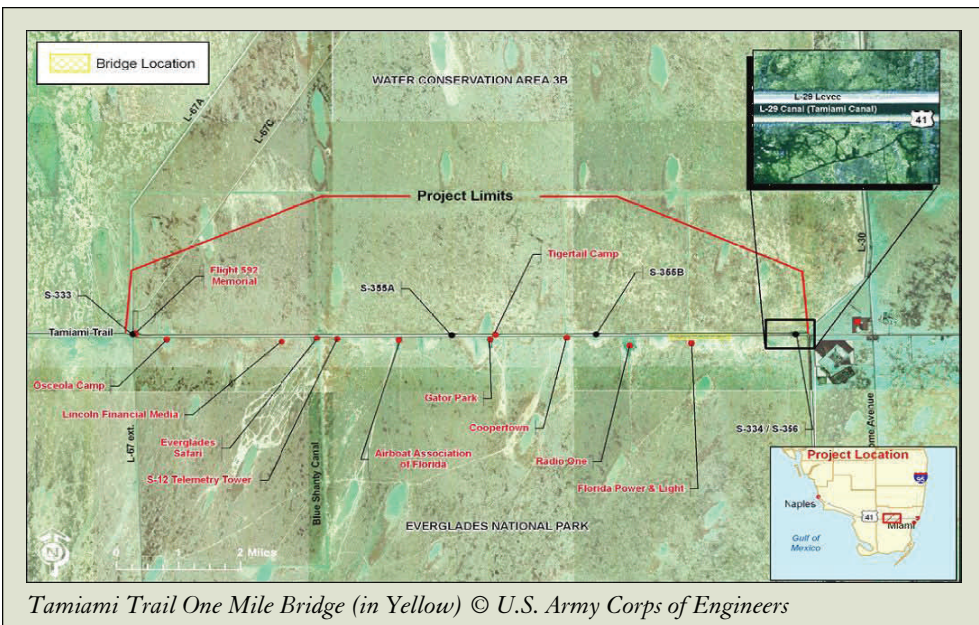
- 1) *Tamiami Trail Modifications*: to increase flow into Everglades National Park;
- 2) *8.5 Square Mile Area*: to provide flood protection for developments in the area; and
- 3) *Conveyance and Seepage Control*: to reconnect freshwater flows and to control the loss of water from seepage eastward into the urban areas.



Despite its importance, a series of planning, financial and legal disputes have caused the Mod Waters project to be delayed almost 20 years, with devastating effects. The NRC stated that “[o]ngoing delays in the Mod Waters project not only have postponed improvements to the hydrological conditions but also may have contributed to recent declines [in endangered Everglades bird populations].”¹ The South Florida Water Management District’s 2008 South Florida Wading Bird Report clearly outlines an overall trend of drastic declines of several key species in the southern part of the Everglades ecosystem. More than 90% of nesting efforts for five key indicator species, the Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, White Ibis, and Wood Stork, occurred in the Southern Everglades marshes and mangrove estuary during the 1930s and early 1940s. However, in 2008 less than 7% of the combined total of these indicator species nested in this region.²

While the project delays may have taken a toll on the ecological productivity of the Everglades, it is not too late to benefit this incredibly resilient ecosystem. Audubon scientists studying Roseate Spoonbill nesting in Florida Bay have recently witnessed the species react positively to beneficial changes in water management practices, and such positive changes can be realized as a result of the Mod Waters project as well. It is very encouraging that an injunction preventing construction of the one mile bridge has been dissolved, thus clearing a major legal hurdle, and opening the door to immediately initiate construction of the one mile bridge.

Now is the time to act on our commitment to Everglades restoration. Although the health of the Everglades ecosystem continues to decline, the NRC’s report notes that “[f]ortunately, none of the endangered bird species exists in such small numbers that they are in immediate danger of extinction. There is still time to rectify the situation through restoration activities, even if some



populations are impacted as a necessary consequence of the early transitions of restoration.”¹ With immediate action, we can achieve the goals of restoration.

¹ *Progress Toward Restoring the Everglades: The Second Biennial Review, 2008. National Research Council of the National Academies. The National Academies Press, Washington DC.*

² *South Florida Wading Bird Report, 2008, Volume 14. Cook, M.I. and M. Kobza, eds. South Florida Water Management District, West Palm Beach, FL.*