

Picayune Strand restoration efforts moving forward with road removal, canal plugging

A thick cloud of dust followed a convoy of water managers and engineers along the gridded gravel roads Tuesday morning in a soon-to-be restored ecosystem in Collier County.

The roads, once concrete, have been torn up and partially degraded in the Picayune Strand State Forest, south of Golden Gates Estates.

The area now marks a joint ecosystem restoration effort between the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, potentially one of the first to reach the finish line in an ambitious Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. The project will finish up in 2024.

The agencies have been working in Picayune since 2007 to restore sheet flow to waters that have been tied up in four canals since the 1960s. Sheet flow is the broad, slow-moving way water spreads across the Everglades.

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Representatives from the Corps, including district commander Col. Andrew Kelly and Lt. Col. Todd Polk took the tour, along with the district's executive director Drew Bartlett and Big Cypress Basin Board chairwoman Charlette Roman.

The tour included visits to road clearing operations, a canal being plugged and one of the three on-site pump stations.

While efforts in Picayune encompass about 55,000 acres, Kelly said closer to 100,000 acres including the surrounding areas, such as the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, will realize the full ecosystem restoration benefits.

At the beginning of the tour, outside a construction trailer near the north end of the forest, the Corps' project manager, Stephen Baisden, addressed water district representatives and members of the media.

"There are three current projects underway right now," he said. "The Miller tram and road removal, a southwest protection levee and culverts to move water under U.S. 41 and county road 92."

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The road removal entails clearing out up to 200 feet of vegetation, removing rocks and boulders and flattening the area so water can easily flow past. The protection feature will be built to protect agricultural lands outside the project's boundary and the culverts will protect the roads from flooding.

During a stop at 68th Avenue SE, Chris Rego with the Corps, said there's about another year left in road removal with all the dirt, rocks and vegetation shifted east to start plugging canals.

Within the project's footprint, about 85 gopher tortoise burrows have been identified. The threatened species is protected by the state, so while construction crews work outside of the tortoises' habitat, a suitable home will be found to relocate any existing tortoises found.

Three canals run north to south in the project, and workers haul in the road removal debris to build 100-foot wide plugs that block the flow of water in the canals, thus restoring the historic sheet flow that gave the Everglades its nickname — River of Grass.

As the convoy reached a plugging in progress, heavy machinery hauled dirt into the canal. The current plugs are going into roughly the northernmost three miles of the Faka Union canal. Once the southwest protection feature is built,

the canal can be fully plugged, said Webster Shipley, the Corps construction manager.

"Next year, the canal will look like a series of linear ponds," Shipley said.

The newly formed ponds will provide needed habitat for a variety of wildlife including alligators, fish and wading birds, said the project's biologist Phoebe Clark.

"The water will provide a constant food source," she said.

The final stop was the largest pump station in the project, situated at the Faka Union canal. The station houses six 1,000 horsepower diesel engines that can pump about 21,000 gallons per minute.

Bartlett said that's 1,866 million gallons per day. For context, he said the Naples water treatment plant puts out about 30 million gallons a day and Fort Myers is around 10 million.

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Marisa Carrozzo, Everglades and water policy manager for the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, was also on the tour and said it's important the restoration project finishes up in 2024.

The Conservancy and other groups are asking the Biden administration for \$740 million each year for the next four years in federal funding to help push along not just the Picayune restoration, but the greater Everglades restoration efforts across south Florida.

"It's a heavy lift," she said. "But if we invest now the projects will see faster completion. In the long run, that will be able to save the taxpayers money."

By the numbers:

Total restoration area: 55,000 acres

Total cost (SFWMD estimate): \$765 million

Work began: 2004

Work estimated to end: 2024

Total roads to be removed: 270 miles

Total canals to be plugged: 48 miles

Remaining acres still in private lands: 203.8

Number of original land owners in South Golden Gate Estates: 19,000

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