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Everglades Law Center • Friends of the Everglades  
National Parks Conservation Association  
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## **Backward Pumping Proposal Threatens the Everglades Ecosystem, Human Health, and our Economic Future**

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is considering a proposal to pump polluted agricultural run-off from the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) backwards into Lake Okeechobee to increase water supply levels. While we applaud the SFWMD's efforts to find solutions to a water-starved Caloosahatchee Estuary, this shortsighted proposal undermines water quality efforts and investments, and will cause long-term harm to the Greater Everglades ecosystem, and the people and the economies that depend upon a healthy environment.



### **Backpumping increases water pollution throughout the Everglades Ecosystem**

Backpumping sends polluted agricultural run-off, laden with nitrogen, phosphorus, and pesticides from the farming industry into Lake Okeechobee to then be sent, untreated, into a fragile estuary. Backpumping increases the difficulty and cost to reduce phosphorus loads entering the Lake by the necessary 75% or more by 2014 in order to meet pollution limits known as the Total Maximum Daily Load. Putting polluted water into the estuaries, escalates harmful algal blooms, decreases oxygen for native species, and threatens human health while undermining local government's investments to meet water quality targets.

### **Backpumping is NOT a Win-Win, but a Lose-Lose for the Environment**

Backpumping pits one part of the ecosystem against others, guaranteeing harm to the greater Everglades ecosystem. Instead of sharing adversity caused by low water levels among all users, backpumping reduces critical water flows to the central and southern Everglades including Everglades National Park. In recent years, the SFWMD has failed to provide the Caloosahatchee with the water it needs, causing serious harm while agricultural users enjoyed full allocations and record profits. The SFWMD must ensure equity amongst users by restricting uses fairly and earlier in the dry season and during droughts.

There are no guarantees that the water backpumped into Lake Okeechobee will be reserved for the Caloosahatchee. Simply changing policy guidance without legally binding enforceable mechanisms for assuring all the backpumped water goes to natural systems opens the door to legitimizing backpumping for agricultural water use.

While this proposal is being characterized as "interim", the last "interim" plan for backpumping

lasted 30 years. There are no enforceable restrictions to ensure this harmful plan will not continue in perpetuity, or be utilized instead for other uses that do not benefit the Caloosahatchee.

### **Backpumping steals water from the Central Everglades and subverts the Everglades Water Quality Plan**

Backpumping is devastating for the Everglades. During droughts, nearly all water flowing to the Everglades would be diverted for backpumping. Backpumping robs the Everglades of the water it needs to survive and it robs Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties of the water that recharges their water supply. A drier Everglades will increase fire risk, soil loss, and damage tree islands and increase the severity of water restrictions in urban areas.

On average, the backpumping proposal calls for 70,000 acre-feet of water to be diverted annually, nearly 50% of the volume of water proposed to be captured by the Central Everglades Planning Process, and approximately 25% of ALL proposed “new” water to be created under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan at a price tag of billions of dollars. This “easy” solution for getting water to the Caloosahatchee is not a “free” option.

The new \$880 million Water Quality Plan is sized to accommodate the volume of water now proposed to be backpumped. Diverting flow from the Everglades undermines Florida’s commitment to this agreement and will ultimately increase the cost and time to achieve it.

Lastly, the Everglades flows south, not north. Even though the Everglades Agricultural Area has been channelized and Lake Okeechobee diked, the direction of water does not change. Using giant pumps to move the River of Grass backwards will have disastrous consequences.

### **Real solutions do exist**

The Caloosatchee has long suffered extremely harmful conditions, and requires a better long-term solution than backpumping. We urge the SFWMD to consider the following options:

- Revise the Adaptive Protocols for Lake Okeechobee Operations to assure natural systems receive clean and adequate water supplies equally with permitted users.
- Revise Adaptive Protocols to eliminate the tributary hydrologic conditions constraint, the 50% threshold, and any condition that cuts off natural systems from water in the water shortage management band unless all other users are equally cut off.
- Prioritize the completion of the Lake Hicpochee project, which can provide 11,000 acre/ft of water and the Spanish Creek/Four Corners project.
- Expedite construction of the CERP C-43 Reservoir, which is designed to capture and store 170,000 acre/ft of new water.
- Establish a policy that does not single out natural systems to be cut off or cut back from needed water supplies but requires all users share cut backs to ensure equity. Sharing adversity provides shared prosperity, ecologically and economically.
- Require greater water conservation measures be implemented for consumptive users to provide flows necessary to protect the ecological health of Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee, and create more equitable water allocation policies.

We urge the SFWMD Governing Board to reject the proposal to return to a *failed water policy*, and instead look to these more sustainable solutions.