

Picayune Strand Restoration Project: *Progress for a Major Western Everglades Watershed*



Introduction

In the middle of the 20th century, developers of a new residential subdivision drained much of the wetlands of southwest Florida. Known as the Golden Gate Estates, the new community was set to become one of the largest planned communities in the nation. Thousands of land buyers from around the world purchased home sites; some investors bought property without ever seeing their plot in person. After massive infrastructure changes to the natural environment, construction stopped and the project's developers abandoned the southern part of the subdivision by the mid-1970s.

The South Golden Gate Estates was the quintessential Florida swampland real estate scam. Thousands of acres of vital Western Everglades habitat were left in ruin.

The Picayune Strand Restoration Project seeks to return a segment of this land to its natural condition. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) made this project possible by buying back 55,000 acres owned by 19,000 landowners.

The Picayune Strand project will reverse decades of drainage and destruction of this vital region of the Western Everglades. It will also help restore the watershed for the Ten Thousand Islands and Rookery Bay estuaries.

Audubon worked with state and federal agencies, the Florida Wildlife Federation, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, and other partners to develop the project and seek state and federal funding to make progress on restoring this important wetlands habitat.

What's at Stake: Benefits for the Western Everglades

The Picayune Strand Restoration Project is the first Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) project under construction and is being completed in cooperation between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). Congress authorized the Picayune Strand project in the 2007 Water Resources Development Act. The restoration will benefit over 70,000 acres of wetland and upland habitats that developers drained to construct the failed subdivision. The project will:

- Restore water quality and salinity balances to the Ten Thousand Islands and Rookery Bay estuaries by reintroducing the natural sheetflow of water.
- Enhance the habitat for iconic species, such as Florida panthers, black bears, Wood Storks, manatees, and many others.
- Recharge water supply aquifers and prevent saltwater intrusion from advancing sea level rise.
- Boost the tourism and resource based economy of Florida through increased wildlife viewing opportunities and more productive fisheries



Picayune Strand Location in Yellow

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Photo by cuatrok77

Project Features and Current Status

The completed Picayune Strand Restoration Project will fill in 58 miles of canals and remove 260 miles of roads. Birds and other wildlife will benefit from the restored flow of water. Project managers have divided the restoration into the following six stages:

- ◆ **Prairie Canal** – 7 miles of canal plugged; 65 miles of roads removed; exotics cleared
 - ◇ *Completed fall 2007*
- ◆ **Merritt Canal and Pump Station** – 13.5 miles of the canal plugged; 95 miles of roads and trams removed; 810 cubic feet per second (cfs) pump station constructed with tie-back levee and spreader canal
 - ◇ *Completed October 2014*
- ◆ **Faka Union Canal and Pump Station** – 12 miles of the canal plugged; 100 miles of road removed; build 2,650 cfs pump station with tie-back levee and spreader canal
 - ◇ *Construction started winter, 2011 and estimated completion in 2019*
- ◆ **Miller Canal and Pump Station** – 13 miles of canal plugged; 65 miles of road removed; build a 1,250 cfs pump station with tie-back levee and spreader canal
 - ◇ *Construction started winter, 2013 and estimated completion in 2019*
- ◆ **Manatee Mitigation at Port of the Islands** – Oxbow creation with freshwater thermal refuge for wintering manatees
 - ◇ *Design underway with construction pending March – December 2015*
- ◆ **Southwestern Protection Feature** – 7 mile levee-like berm to prevent flooding from restored sheet flow
 - ◇ *Construction and design pending with estimated completion in summer 2018*

Audubon Recommendations for Completing Restoration of the Picayune Strand

In 2007, Congress authorized the Picayune Strand project at a cost of \$420 million. Due to unexpected project revisions and additions, officials now estimate costs to reach \$618 million. The Corps cannot complete construction of the Faka Union and Miller Canal phases of restoration until they receive approval for this extra funding. A Post-Authorization Cost Change Request, also known as a “Section 902 fix,” is needed before the Corps can obtain the needed funds.

Audubon recommends the following:

- ◆ The Corps must expedite their completion of the Limited Re-evaluation Report (LRR). This is a necessary prerequisite to presenting the “Section 902 fix” to Congress.
- ◆ Once the LRR is complete, members of Congress must make passage of the Picayune Strand “Section 902 fix” a top priority. Any delay in authorizing additional funding will set the restoration project back past the 2019 date of completion. The Faka Union and Miller Canal phases are the most in need of this Congressional action and these phases of restoration provide over 70% of the planned project benefits.

