

EPA strategy detailed in report from Florida Geographic Task Force

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has announced the results of a task force review in the south Florida area. The review provided the underpinning for a \$1.1-million south Florida initiative proposed in President Bush's Fiscal Year 1993 EPA budget.

The task force study examined major environmental issues in the area and recommended a series of measures and strategies to protect and restore the environment of south Florida.

The comprehensive strategy is focused on addressing mercury contamination, improving the protection of native habitat and wildlife diversity, reducing surface water and ground water degradation, improving air quality, lowering toxic emissions, improving environmental monitoring using the Agency's Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program, and improving coordination of multi-media and inter-agency activities.

The comprehensive strategy will

include an increase in the agency's civil and criminal enforcement of federal environmental statutes and regulations affecting those areas where violations are most frequent.

EPA already has begun to address concerns in two key areas. The Agency has increased participation in mercury research and has begun planning for an integrated monitoring system based on the Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program model. The EPA's Office of Research and

Development, at the request of Region IV, has provided \$400,000 for planning and monitoring assistance for southern Florida. Additional funds will be sought in 1993 to support the Everglades-Wetlands Study, which will investigate the causes of mercury contamination in the Everglades.

"The challenge we face here in Florida is to restore the productivity of our great natural systems and to seek a reconciliation between the health of natural systems, on one

hand, and growth and prosperity on the other," said EPA Administrator William K. Reilly. "We will do our part. I am confident that the strategies developed here will serve to protect and restore the environments of south Florida."

"We can preserve the resources and environment of southern Florida if we can effectively coordinate our efforts in planning, implementation and enforcement," said Greer C. Tidwell, EPA regional administrator. "EPA is willing to do everything it is authorized to do in order to accomplish this goal and hopes to work in a new partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies to achieve our common objective."

South Florida consists of large areas of urban and agricultural development existing side-by-side with environmentally sensitive wetlands and other natural resources. In south Florida, there are more than 2 million acres of federally managed lands, including 1.4 million acres in the Big Cypress National Preserve. The area also is home to an estimated 6 million people.

The Everglades region is internationally recognized as a unique ecosystem that has been extensively altered by human development. The current Everglades area is estimated to be only 64 percent of its historic size because of agricultural drainage and urban conversions. The watershed which supports it has been reduced 50 percent by drainage diversions.

There are numerous planning and regulatory agencies at all levels of government, but there needs to be better communication and management coordination in the area, the study found.

The South Florida Geographic Study identified several critical environmental issues and management options to address them:

- More than 1 million acres of the Everglades are subject to a health advisory because of mercury contaminated fish.
- Mercury contamination has resulted in contamination to wildlife, particularly the Florida panther and other endangered species.
- Urban and agricultural land conversion activities are resulting in the loss of habitat critical for endangered species and contributing to a decline in biological diversity.
- According to state and University of Florida studies, an estimated 32 percent of the wetlands in south Florida have been lost to drainage and land conversions. This loss is continuing at a high rate.

The Task Force also examined the regulatory programs of federal, state, regional and local agencies that have jurisdiction in south Florida.

Copies of the draft report may be obtained by contacting Heinz Mueller, EPA Region IV, 345 Courtland St., N.E. Atlanta, Ga. 30365, 404-347-3776.

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