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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-520](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The South Florida ecosystem covers about 18,000 square miles and is home to the Everglades, a national resource. Over the past 100 years, efforts to manage the flow of water through the ecosystem have jeopardized its health. In 2000, a strategy to restore the ecosystem was set; restoration was expected to take at least 40 years and cost \$15.4 billion. The restoration comprises hundreds of projects, including 60 key projects known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), to be undertaken by a partnership of federal, state, local, and tribal governments.

Given the size and complexity of the restoration, GAO was asked to report on the (1) status of project implementation and expected benefits, (2) factors that determine project sequencing, (3) amount of funding provided for the effort and extent that costs have increased, and (4) primary mathematical models that guide the restoration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending actions to ensure that agencies apply the established sequencing criteria when making implementation decisions for some projects and that the development of models and their interfaces is better coordinated. The agencies generally agreed with these recommendations, although the state was concerned that the first recommendation could lead to further delays and cost increases.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-520.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu K. Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM

Restoration Is Moving Forward but Is Facing Significant Delays, Implementation Challenges, and Rising Costs

What GAO Found

While many of the restoration effort's 222 projects have been completed or are ongoing, a core set of projects that are critical to the success of the restoration are behind schedule or not yet started. Specifically, 43 projects have been completed, 107 are being implemented, and 72 are in design, in planning, or are not yet started. The completed projects will provide improved water quality and additional habitat for wildlife, and the ongoing projects will also help restore wildlife habitat and improve water flow within the ecosystem. However, the projects most critical to the restoration's overall success—the CERP projects—are among those that are currently being designed, planned, or have not yet been started. Some of these projects are behind schedule by up to 6 years. Despite project delays, officials believe that significant progress has been made in acquiring land, constructing water quality projects, and restoring a natural water flow to the Kissimmee River—the headwater of the ecosystem. In addition, many of the policies, strategies, and agreements required to guide the restoration in the future are now in place. To help provide further momentum to the restoration, Florida recently began expediting the design and construction of eight key projects, with the hope that they would immediately benefit the environment, enhance flood control, and increase water supply.

There are no overarching sequencing criteria that restoration officials use when making implementation decisions for all 222 projects that make up the restoration effort. Instead, decisions for 162 projects are driven largely by the availability of funds. For the remaining 60 projects—which are among the most critical to the success of the restoration effort—the Corps of Engineers and the Congress established criteria to ensure the goals and purposes of CERP are achieved. However, the sequencing plan developed for these projects in 2005 is not consistent with the criteria established by the Corps. Therefore, there is little assurance that the plan will be effective.

From fiscal years 1999 through 2006, the federal government contributed \$2.3 billion, and Florida contributed \$4.8 billion, for a total of about \$7.1 billion for the restoration. However, CERP funding was about \$1.2 billion short of the funds originally projected for this period. In addition, the total estimated costs for the restoration have increased by 28 percent—from \$15.4 billion in 2000 to at least \$19.7 billion in 2006. More importantly, these cost estimates do not represent the true costs for the overall restoration effort because they do not include all cost components for a number of projects.

There are 27 primary mathematical models that guide the restoration effort. These include (1) hydrological, (2) water quality, and (3) ecological models. Although 21 of the 27 models are able to interface with other models and provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of restoration efforts on the ecosystem, many agency officials stated that additional interfaces are needed. Because coordinating the development of these interfaces is resource intensive, it has been a low priority for the agencies.