



Kissimmee River Water Reservation Will Conserve Water for Fish and Wildlife

While water conservation usually refers to water saved for the benefit of people, in the Kissimmee River Basin – site of the \$800 million Kissimmee River Restoration Project, the Kissimmee River and Chain of Lakes Water Reservation will protect, or reserve, water needed for the protection of fish and wildlife.

"The Kissimmee Water Reservation is a critical component of the incredibly successful Kissimmee River Restoration Project," said Don Medellin. "Reserving water for fish and wildlife will help ensure continued success of this project, which is restoring riverine and floodplain communities that make up some of the richest fish and wildlife habitat in Florida." Medellin is the project manager for the Kissimmee River and Chain of Lakes Water Reservation and is responsible leading this rule-making initiative.

The Kissimmee River and Chain of Lakes form the headwaters of Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Together, these Central Florida water resources shelter 178 species of fish, wetland-dependent wading birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. The basin contains a nationally recognized largemouth bass fishery, nesting colonies of the endangered wood stork and snail kite, and one of the largest concentrations of nesting bald eagles in the United States.

The Kissimmee River Restoration Project (KRPP) is a partnership between the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to restore the river/floodplain ecosystem.

Before the Kissimmee River was channelized in the 1960s, it meandered for 103 miles between Lake Kissimmee and Lake Okeechobee and contained diverse fish and wildlife resources and habitats associated with sand bars, vegetation beds, and variable flow conditions. The river overflowed its banks frequently and inundated the 1- to 2-mile-wide floodplain for extended periods of time, creating a mosaic of wetland plant communities. Channelization converted the waterway into a 30-foot deep, 300 feet-wide canal that altered the hydrology of the system and eliminated its interaction with the habitat-rich floodplain. This altered hydrology had devastating impacts to fish, wildlife and their habitats.

The KRPP restores over 40 square miles of river/floodplain ecosystem including 43 miles of meandering river channel and 27,000 acres of wetlands. The proposed water reservation rules for the Kissimmee River and Chain of Lakes will ensure the sustainability of this world class restoration project for future generations.

Following multiple public workshops to garner public input, the technical support documents and draft rules were changed numerous times to address stakeholder concerns. At its November 12, 2020 Business Meeting, the SFWMD Governing Board authorized staff to publish the Notice of Proposed Rule in the Florida Administrative Register. The effective date of the rule is expected in the spring of 2021.

The proposed rules will reserve from additional allocation:

- 1) all surface water in the Kissimmee River, its floodplain, and the Headwaters Revitalization Lakes – Lakes Cypress Hatchineha and Kissimmee;
- 2) quantities of surface water up to specific water reservation stages in the Upper Chain of Lakes; and
- 3) surface water and groundwater in the surficial aquifer system and contributing waterbodies that contribute water to the reservation lakes and the Kissimmee River and floodplain.

The proposed reservation rules will be implemented in coordination with SFWMD's water use permitting program to ensure future water users do not withdraw reserved water. Direct and indirect withdrawals of water from the Kissimmee River and Headwaters Lakes will be limited to existing permitted water use allocations. Additional direct and indirect withdrawals of water from the Upper Chain of Lakes and contributing waterbodies will be limited to quantities of surface water above the proposed water reservation stages, as specified for each reservation waterbody.

Any new withdrawals authorized under the water use permitting program shall not reduce average annual flows at S-65 – located where Lake Kissimmee flows to the Kissimmee River – by 4.18 percent. This requirement is imposed to ensure that water use withdrawals do not adversely affect the KRRP restoration targets.