



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Florida's Ranchlands Helping to Preserve Landscapes, Protect and Improve Waters**

*New land management strategy achieves environmental benefits, keeps lands on tax rolls, sustains jobs*



*(Click on the picture for a larger version.)*

**Okeechobee, FL** – Leaders of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) today marked the expansion of an innovative, cost-saving land management strategy with the signing of partnership agreements with eight Florida ranchers. Water managers are collaborating with landowners to achieve water storage, water quality and habitat improvement benefits north of Lake Okeechobee but at less cost than traditional government land acquisition programs.

DEP Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr. and SFWMD Executive Director Melissa Meeker met with landowners at the Dixie Cattle Ranch in Okeechobee County to finalize the new agreements that will store 4,800-acre feet of water on private lands and improve water quality in Lake Okeechobee, the coastal estuaries and the Everglades.

The ranchlands – totaling 9,500 acres across three counties – have become part of the SFWMD’s Dispersed Water Management Program to store water on public, private and tribal lands. The program is an important new tool that is helping to improve water quality, protect water resources and conserve Florida’s habitats. At the same time, using working ranchlands to achieve environmental benefits also helps sustain jobs, keeps land on local tax rolls and avoids burdening taxpayers with new debt to buy title to the land. The effort parallels the water resource goals of Florida’s successful land acquisition programs without the higher cost of buying and managing land.

“Getting the water right is central to every aspect of Florida life and its future,” said DEP Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr.

“Collaborating with property owners to store excess water helps advance the conservation and natural resource protection goals of highly successful environmental protection programs, without the high cost of land acquisition, the burden of ongoing debt payments and leaving landowners to do what they do best – manage the land and support our economy.”

Located just north of the City of Okeechobee and the lake, 1,075 acres on the Dixie Ranch is becoming a working example of the innovative land preservation and water storage strategy. With simple features such as berms and water control structures already built by the landowner, the property is ideally suited to capture and store water that would otherwise flow directly into Lake Okeechobee. This helps prevent nutrients such as phosphorus from reaching the lake and reduces potential discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, as well as offering additional flood protection for the communities surrounding these water bodies. Rehydrating ranchland also benefits habitat for native plants and wildlife.

“Shallow water storage coupled with large regional reservoirs provides additional tools for better managing water in the regional system and protecting South Florida’s water resources,” said SFWMD Executive Director Melissa Meeker. “The Dispersed Water

### Benefits:

- *Reduces excess water flowing into Lake Okeechobee during the wet season*
- *Reduces the amount of water discharged to the coastal estuaries for flood protection*
- *Provides valuable shallow groundwater recharge for water supply*
- *Improves water quality and rehydration of drained systems*
- *Enhances plant and wildlife habitat*
- *Helps sustain the local economy*

### By the numbers:

- *Through a combination of public and private projects, 229,000 acres of land is available for storage*
  - *Provides 131,500 acre-feet of water retention/storage*
- *To date, the District has collaborated with more than 100 participating landowners*
- *The ultimate goal for the program is to provide 450,000 acre-feet of retention/storage throughout the Northern Everglades watershed*
- *450,000 acre-feet of additional storage equates to approximately 1 foot of water off of Lake Okeechobee*

Management Program is an innovative way of involving private partners in environmental solutions and achieving our goals for water storage, water quality and habitat enhancement in a fiscally responsible way for taxpayers.”

### **Dispersed Water Management Program**

Since the start of its Dispersed Water Management Program in 2005, the District has collaborated with a coalition of agencies, environmental organizations, ranchers and researchers to utilize approximately 229,000 acres of land for water storage, water quality improvement and habitat enhancement. In addition to employing regional public projects, the program encourages property owners to retain water on their land rather than drain it and to accept and detain regional runoff.

“The future of water storage north of Lake Okeechobee relies on innovative partnerships and marks a milestone in our collective efforts to preserve both the Northern Everglades and our working landscapes for future generations,” said Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam. “This program is a progressive way of achieving our shared goals of environmental restoration and a healthy and sustainable agricultural economy.”

Based on data and experience gained from eight original pilot projects, the District in October doubled participation in the program with the approval of eight new contracts, spanning Okeechobee, Polk and Highlands counties. Together, projects on the newly enrolled lands will provide 4,800 acre-feet of regional storage and additional nutrient benefits. One of the pilot projects used to develop the Dispersed Water Management Program was shown in a single year to have removed 8.4 metric tons of phosphorus to improve water quality in the Lake Okeechobee Watershed. The District is investing \$7 million over 10 years for the latest contracts. A total of \$46 million has been designated over the next five years to help further achieve program goals.

The Dispersed Water Management Program Northern Everglades – Payment for Environmental Services is being implemented in coordination with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), UF/IFAS and the World Wildlife Fund.

### **For more information:**

- [Just the Facts: Dispersed Water Management Program](#)
- [List of the FY2012 Projects: Northern Everglades](#)
- [Map of the Latest Projects](#)
- [Overview of Water Storage and Treatment Projects](#)
- [Before and After Photos of a Dispersed Water Project](#)
- [Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program](#)
- [Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project](#)

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**About the South Florida Water Management District**

*The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.*