

**What is being announced?**

The Department of Environmental Protection is releasing to the public the final component of a water quality standard for phosphorus for America's Everglades. The proposed rule establishes the first-ever numeric criterion of 10 parts per billion (ppb) for phosphorus in the Everglades Protection Area and provides the process for assessing progress toward achieving that goal.

**What is the Everglades Protection Area?**

The Everglades Protection Area is comprised of Water Conservation Areas 1, 2, 3 and Everglades National Park.

**What are the components of the water quality standard?**

There are three components of the water quality standard: designated use, numeric criterion and the process for assessing attainment of the criterion. In the 1994 Everglades Protection Act, the Florida Legislature designated the appropriate use of the water body for fishing and swimming (Class III). On December 11, 2001, the Department initiated the development of the water quality standard with the announcement that scientific research and biological analysis indicated 10 ppb for phosphorus was the appropriate criterion to protect Everglades flora and fauna. Today, the Department is presenting the comprehensive water quality standard, including the process for attaining the criterion.

**How did the Department establish the criterion?**

The criterion is based on science. The Department evaluated the influence of water quality on the biology of the natural system and determined that phosphorus levels above 10 ppb altered the natural flora and fauna of the Everglades.

**What is the current water quality of the Everglades?**

Approximately 90% of the 2.4 million acres of the Everglades Protection Area currently meets the stringent standard. These 2.16 million acres are referred to as unimpacted areas. Phosphorus levels in approximately 240,000 acres, known as impacted areas, are less than 35 ppb. The water quality standard applies to the entire Everglades Protection Area.

**To date, what has been done to improve water quality in the Everglades?**

Over the last decade, phosphorus loads entering the Everglades Protection Area have decreased by over 90%, from 270 ppb to less than 35 ppb. The implementation of Best Management Practices by farmers in the Everglades Agricultural Area and the construction and improved management of Stormwater Treatment Areas are credited with these dramatic reductions.

### **How will the criterion be attained in all parts of the Everglades?**

While the vast majority of the Everglades currently meets the numeric phosphorus criterion, it is likely to take decades for the water in the impacted areas to attain the stringent criterion. The rule requires the use of Best Available Phosphorus Reduction Technology to improve water quality and incorporates essential components of the Long-Term Plan to prevent backsliding in the unimpacted areas and to achieve the criterion in the impacted areas.

### **How long will it take for the entire Everglades to achieve the criterion?**

Even as water quality continues to improve, restoration will be a long-term process because of historic phosphorus levels found in sediments. Because lower phosphorus loads entering the Everglades are likely to trigger a release of additional phosphorus from the soil (a natural phenomenon known as reflux), it may take decades for the entire Everglades to achieve the criterion. To date, there is no way to treat or prevent reflux from occurring.

### **What is the Long-Term Plan?**

The Long-Term Plan is a multi-year strategy to reduce phosphorus in the Everglades using "green technology", which includes the continued optimization of Best Management Practices and Stormwater Treatment Areas. Optimization of Best Management Practices and Stormwater Treatment Areas have proven effective at reducing phosphorus loads and are the most cost-effective, environmentally preferable means to achieve further reductions. At this time, chemical treatment is not cost-effective for treating discharges entering the Everglades and the by-product generated by chemical treatment may cause adverse environmental impacts. The South Florida Water Management District is required to outline progress and update the plan in a report to the Department of Environmental Protection no later than July 31, 2006.

### **How does the rule assess progress?**

Water, representative of the receiving waters of the Everglades marsh, will be measured on a monthly basis at monitoring stations in the existing network. Data will be screened for quality assurance.

### **What is the next step in the process?**

The Department will officially present the rule to the Environmental Regulation Commission on February 27, 2003 for its review and approval. The Department will publish a notice in the Florida Administrative Weekly before the Commission votes on the rule. The 1994 Everglades Forever Act requires the Department to adopt a numeric standard by December 2003.