



Highlights of [GAO-07-1250T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Democracy and Human Rights, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The South Florida ecosystem covers about 18,000 square miles, and is home to the Everglades, one of the world's unique environmental resources. Historic efforts to redirect the flow of water through the ecosystem have jeopardized its health and reduced the Everglades to about half of its original size. In 1993, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's World Heritage Committee (WHC) added Everglades National Park (Park) to its List of World Heritage in Danger sites. In 2000, a strategy to restore the ecosystem was set; the effort was expected to take at least 40 years and cost \$15.4 billion. It comprises 222 projects, including 60 key projects known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), to be undertaken by a multiagency partnership.

This testimony is based on GAO's May 2007 report, *South Florida Ecosystem: Restoration Is Moving Forward, but Is Facing Significant Delays, Implementation Challenges, and Rising Costs*, and a review of WHC decision documents relating to the Park's listing. This statement addresses the (1) status of projects implemented (2) status of projects key to improving the health of the Park, (3) project sequencing factors, and (4) funding provided for the effort and extent to which costs have increased.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations.

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## SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM

### Some Restoration Progress Has Been Made, but the Effort Faces Significant Delays, Implementation Challenges, and Rising Costs

#### What GAO Found

Of the restoration effort's 222 projects, 43 have been completed, 107 are being implemented, and 72 are in design, in planning, or are not yet started. The completed and ongoing projects will provide improved water quality and water flow within the ecosystem and additional habitat for wildlife. According to restoration officials, 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. Many of the policies, strategies, and agreements required to guide the restoration in the future are also now in place. However, the 60 CERP projects, which are the most critical to the restoration's overall success, are among those that are currently being designed, planned, or have not yet started. Some of these projects are behind schedule by up to 6 years. 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, thus providing further momentum to the restoration.

In 2006, the WHC adopted several key benchmarks that if met would facilitate removal of the Everglades National Park from its List of World Heritage in Danger sites. As noted by WHC, achievement of these benchmarks was linked to the implementation of nine key restoration projects. However, only one of these projects has been completed, four are currently being implemented and four are currently being designed. Moreover, the benefits of these projects will not be available for many years because most of the projects are scheduled for completion between 2011 and 2035.

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. There are regulatory criteria to ensure that the goals and purposes of the 60 CERP projects are achieved in a cost effective manner. However, the 2005 sequencing plan developed for these projects is not consistent with the criteria because some of the data needed to fully apply these criteria were not available. Therefore, there is little assurance that the plan will be effective. GAO recommended that the agencies obtain the needed data and then comprehensively reassess the sequencing of the CERP projects.

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, federal funding was about \$1.4 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 \$19.7 billion in 2006 because of project scope changes, increased construction costs, and higher land costs. 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.