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SOUTH FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

Task Force Needs to Improve Science Coordination to Increase the Likelihood of Success

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-03-345, a report to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies, Appropriations Committee, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Restoration of the South Florida ecosystem is a significant federal and state priority, requiring the development and use of extensive scientific information. GAO was asked to report on the funds spent on scientific activities for restoration, the gaps that exist in scientific information, and the extent to which scientific activities are being coordinated.

What GAO Recommends

In order to improve the coordination of scientific activities for the South Florida ecosystem restoration initiative, we recommend that the Secretary of the Interior, as chair of the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force (Task Force), clarify the plans and documents the Science Coordination Team (SCT) needs to complete and the time frames for completing them, as well as evaluate the SCT's staff resources and allocate sufficient staff to carry out its responsibilities. We are also making recommendations to improve working relations between the Task Force and the SCT.

In commenting on the draft report, the Department of the Interior agreed with the premises of our report that scientific activities need to be coordinated better and that the SCT's role needs to be clarified. Interior said that ultimately the Task Force needs to review and approve actions on GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-345.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry Hill at (202) 512-3841.

What GAO Found

From fiscal years 1993 through 2002, federal and state agencies spent $576 million to conduct mission-related scientific research, monitoring, and assessment in support of the restoration of the South Florida ecosystem. Eight federal agencies spent a little less than half of this amount, or $273 million. The South Florida Water Management District—the state agency most heavily involved in the restoration initiative—spent $303 million. With this federal and state funding, agencies made progress in developing information and the adaptive management tools necessary for restoration purposes. "Adaptive management" is an approach for improving resource management that uses models and monitoring as tools to improve the probability of achieving restoration goals. In particular, scientists state that they identified the key factors responsible for ecosystem degradation, such as altered water flow patterns throughout the ecosystem.

While scientific understanding of these restoration issues has improved, significant gaps remain in the scientific information and adaptive management tools needed, that, if not addressed soon, will hinder the success of restoration. Gaps in the development of scientific information, such as information on the risks of contaminants to plants and animals in the ecosystem, may prevent action to address risks to the entire ecosystem or to one or more of its regions. Gaps are also present in the development of adaptive management tools—such as models and a comprehensive monitoring plan based on key indicators—that allow scientists to assess how the implementation of restoration projects and plans affect the ecosystem and whether this implementation is resulting in successful restoration. The development of these tools is important to allow scientists to track the progress of restoration.

Restoration of the South Florida ecosystem is being coordinated and facilitated by the Task Force, formed from participating federal, state, and local agencies and tribal entities. The Task Force is responsible for coordinating scientific activities for restoration, but has yet to establish an effective means of doing so, thereby limiting the extent to which restoration decisions can be based on sound scientific information. The Task Force established the SCT to coordinate the science activities of the many agencies involved in restoration, but it did not give the SCT clear direction on which of the responsibilities were a priority for supporting the Task Force, contributing to the SCT's inability to accomplish several of its most important tasks. Further, unlike other restoration initiatives, the SCT works as a voluntary group with no full-time and few part-time staff. Recognizing its resource limitations, the SCT has focused on a few priority responsibilities. Without first clarifying the responsibilities of the SCT and then providing it sufficient resources to accomplish these responsibilities, the Task Force cannot ensure that scientific activities are being adequately coordinated, or that key scientific information is available for restoration decisions.