

Essential #2

Restore the Kissimmee River Watershed



Restoration efforts on the Kissimmee River Floodplain have demonstrated that Everglades restoration is feasible and can be successful.

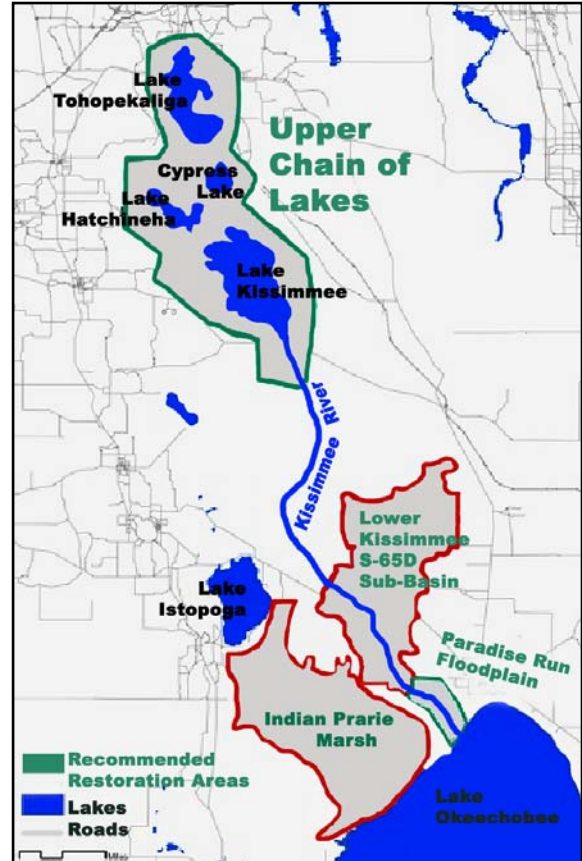
The Problem

Historically, the Kissimmee River flowed south from Lake Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee over a 103-mile long shallow path. The meandering river was very shallow and created a vast floodplain up to two miles wide. Covering approximately 50,000 acres, this floodplain contained a diverse mosaic of wetland communities that supported birds, fish, and other wildlife. The Kissimmee River’s meandering flow moderated high water and wet season flows, sequestering nutrients and sediments before releasing water into Lake Okeechobee.

But in the late 1960’s, the Kissimmee was transformed into a 56-mile long ditch, eliminating two-thirds of the historical wetlands, and destroying valuable wintering waterfowl and fish habitats. The river’s transformation also impacted the Upper Chain of Lakes—reducing their depth and forcing their flows into strictly regulated discharges sent rapidly into Lake Okeechobee. The folly of ditching the Kissimmee River was recognized almost the day it was completed, and the magnitude of the ecological catastrophe led to public outcry.

Three decades after the initial hearings and investigations by the Corps of Engineers, there has been real progress in reversing this disaster. Almost 22 miles of the middle section of the canal will be filled in, and about half of the floodplain will be restored. The recovery of wetland function has been much faster than expected, with rapid recolonization by native plants and animals.

The Kissimmee River Restoration is a true Florida environmental success story three decades in the making. But much more can be done. The Kissimmee Valley remains one of the most pristine and beautiful natural areas in Florida. We need to act now to continue the restoration efforts, and make the Kissimmee Valley a lasting legacy.



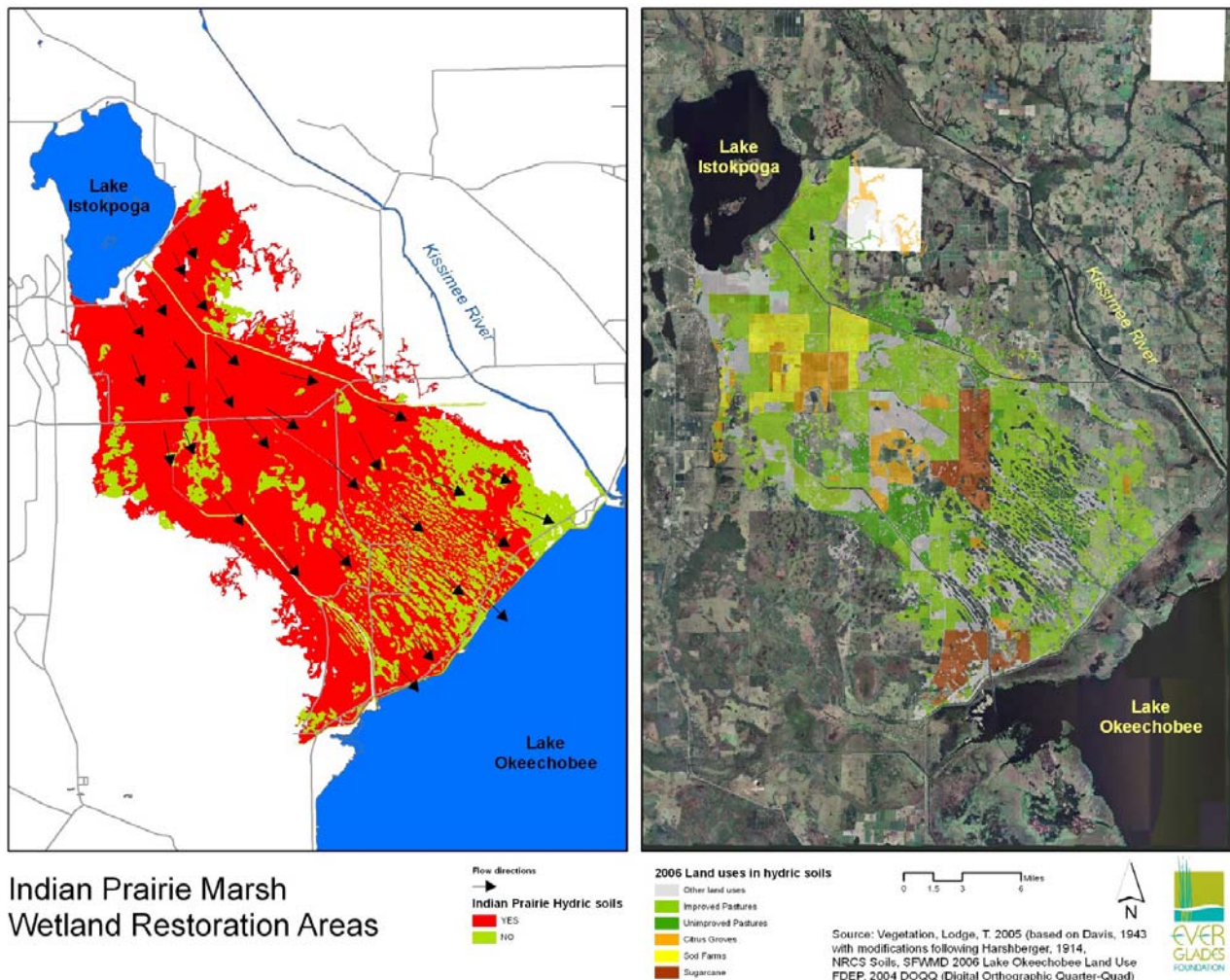
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The Solution

The question is now “Where should the restoration of the Kissimmee River basin proceed next?” Watershed restoration in the lower basin, floodplain restoration in the lower Kissimmee River, and headwaters enhancements in the upper basin are key to the restoration of the Kissimmee River Watershed. These efforts include projects in four sub-basins--the Indian Prairie sub-basin, the S-65D basin, the Paradise Run reach of the lower Kissimmee River, and the Upper Chain of Lakes.

- Improve wetlands in the Indian Prairie Marsh.** The area between Lake Istokpoga and Lake Okeechobee known as the Indian Prairie Marsh once functioned as a “mini-Everglades.” 115,500 acres of former wetlands in this area have been identified that could provide functional water retention, and could become restored marshes. Degrading the northwestern section of the Herbert Hoover Dike would reconnect these wetlands with Lake Okeechobee, providing enormous habitat benefits.

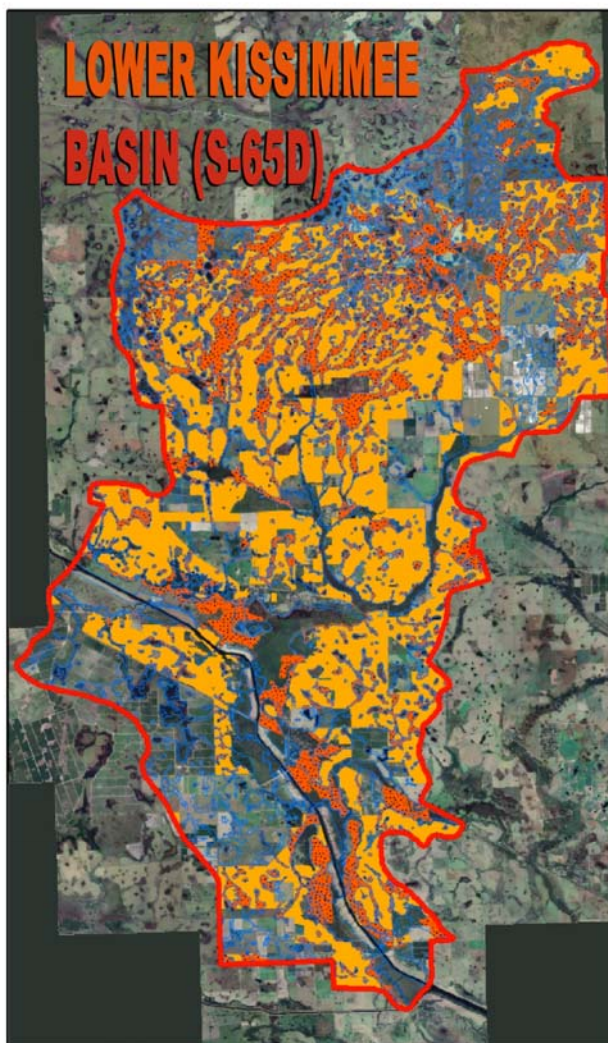


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The Solution continued...

- **Work with ranchers in the S-65D basin to protect wetlands in the watershed.**
 Approximately 24,000 acres in the S-65D sub-basin represent pastures that have soils and elevations that would sustain wetlands. These lands (shown in orange below), are excellent candidates for conservation programs such as the Wetland Reserve Program, or other programs that offer incentives to rural landowners for providing water recharge and storage benefits on their property.



- **Restore the Paradise Run section of the Kissimmee River.**
 This is the last reach of the Kissimmee River before it empties into Lake Okeechobee. This section of historic floodplain could be restored much like the section further north, recovering an additional 10 miles of river and 3,950 acres of high quality habitat without requiring the expensive task of filling the C-38.
- **Improve hydrologic conditions in the Upper Chain of Lakes, including Lake Kissimmee, Lake Hatchineha and Cypress Lake.** These lakes are highly managed, and while there will be some improvements from the Headwaters Revitalization Project, additional changes are needed. The regulation schedules for the lakes and canals need to simulate the natural patterns of wetting and drying, and vary with the amount of rainfall. This effort will require the South Florida Water Management District to acquire more land and replace water control structures with more sophisticated equipment to hold additional water.