Northern Everglades Strategies

Audubon supports a range of strategies to conserve and manage habitat and water resources in the Northern Everglades, retain ranchlands, protect and restore wetlands and wildlife habitat, and restore a more natural hydroperiod. Approaches include working in coalitions, showcasing ranch conservation and water management examples, driving media and public support, and advocacy for the following:

Kissimmee River Restoration – Completing this project has the best potential for creating additional water storage and wildlife habitat in the Northern Everglades. The project is recommended for funding by the Senate Select Committee.

Rural and Family Lands Protection Act (RFLP) – This program of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) acquires conservation easements to keep lands in permanent agriculture. Audubon proposed the 2001 legislation creating the RFLP. With others Audubon supported the FY13 $11.5 appropriation for RFLP, and recommends $25 million appropriations for 2014. The FDACS 2013 RFLP priority list includes 50 projects, with 22 proposed in the Northern Everglades. Audubon also supports Florida Forever projects in the Lake Okeechobee watershed.

Dispersed Water Management – This program contracts with agricultural landowners to store and treat water on private lands. Initiated as the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project (FRESP) with 8 pilot projects demonstrating initial success, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) began scaling up efforts and has gone through a series of project solicitations. SFWMD has also contracted for one large project (Nicodemus Slough), a shallow reservoir storing more than 30,000 acre feet of water drawn from Lake Okeechobee. Recent solicitations resulted in 24 qualified project proposals, which collectively would store/detain more than 100,000 acre feet of water in the Northern Everglades. FDACS’s legislative request includes $10 million in for Dispersed Water Management and Water Farming. Audubon recommends an engineering reconnaissance study and cost-benefit analysis by SFWMD to identify need, locations and projected financing for Dispersed Water Management and Water Farming projects.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service/Wetland Reserve Program – Since 2009, USDA has acquired 95,000 acres in conservation easements, spending more than $373 million to encourage wetland and wildlife habitat protection in the Northern Everglades. The Wetland Reserve program focuses on lands with identified wetland characteristics that if restored by preventing development, limiting intensive agriculture and eliminating or modifying drainage structures, would increase wildlife and water resource values. WRP can be matched with other agency funds. Audubon advocates continued funding for these programs under the federal Farm Bill.

Lake Okeechobee BMAP – Audubon supports state appropriations to implement BMPs in the Lake Okeechobee Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP). The BMAP should include benchmarks to implement the TMDL, with improved BMP verification, monitoring, and basin level water quality improvements in the Okeechobee watershed.

USFWS Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge – Designated by the Secretary of Interior in January, 2012, this new refuge in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes and Kissimmee Prairie area envisions 100,000 acres of easements and 50,000 acres of fee property acquisition. Key species intended to be benefitted are the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, Bald Eagle, Wood Stork, Sandhill Crane and Audubon’s Crested Caracara. Audubon lent significant support to establish the new refuge and supports addition of state, federal and private lands with easements.

Property Tax Relief for Water Retention Lands – Audubon supports SB 312 to extend green belt tax relief to agricultural land owners who use private land in agency approved beneficial water resource programs.

Water Policy – Audubon is engaged in the Central Florida Water Initiative and regulatory efforts to set reservations and recommends that over-allocations of limited water supplies be rolled back. Audubon emphasizes water conservation as a water source, and alternative water supply projects that do not harm natural systems.

Assigned staff: Charles Lee - water and land projects/ Jane Graham - water policy/Paul Grey - science and technical