Historically, the Everglades delivered freshwater south from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico in a slow uninterrupted pattern called sheetflow. To enable urban development and agriculture in the area, the sheetflow was cut off while the water was drained and replaced by a complex system of controlled canals and ditches. Since 1928, Tamiami Trail has acted as one of these dams, preventing the natural flow of water at the historic heart of flow into Everglades National Park. Continuing the bridging of Tamiami Trail is key to reconnecting the historic sloughs that provide freshwater and critical habitat to iconic Gulf Coast wildlife in Florida Bay.

The first one-mile bridge, completed in March 2013, is part of the Modified Water Deliveries to Everglades National Park (Mod Waters) project. The goal of Mod Waters, approved by Congress in 1989, is to re-establish the historic sheetflow from the Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.

More than 90% of nesting efforts for five key indicator species, the Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, White Ibis, and Wood Stork, occurred in the Southern Everglades marshes and mangrove estuary during the 1930s and early 1940s. The South Florida Water Management District’s 2012 South Florida Wading Bird Report demonstrated the third consecutive year of poor wading bird nesting across the Everglades. Audubon scientists specifically studying Roseate Spoonbill nesting in Florida Bay have witnessed the species react positively to beneficial changes in water management practices, and such positive changes should be realized in the near future as a result of the Tamiami Trail one-mile bridge.

On the heels of the one-mile bridge completion, another 5.5 miles of bridging is planned as part of the Tamiami Trail Next Steps project. When a full 6.5 miles of roadway are lifted, habitat connectivity will greatly improve the chances of recreating the historic abundance of life in the Everglades, Florida Bay, and the Gulf Coast.

Florida Bay’s salinity is important for Gulf Coast wildlife. As an estuary, the coastal transition zone between the Southern Everglades and Florida Bay has salinity levels that fluctuate between freshwater and marine conditions, depending on wind, evaporation, and freshwater flows from the Everglades. As water management has increased the salinity of Florida Bay, plants and animals sensitive to salinity levels have suffered population reductions. Reduced freshwater flow input from the Everglades reduces submerged aquatic vegetation abundance and prey-based fish production, limiting the food available for nesting birds and other Gulf Coast wildlife.