

SENATE STAFF ANALYSIS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

BILL: SB 684

SPONSOR: Natural Resources Committee

SUBJECT: Bonding for Everglades Restoration

DATE: January 14, 2002 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Gee	Voigt	NR	Favorable
2.	Fournier	Johansen	FT	Favorable
3.			AGG	
4.			AP	
5.				
6.				

I. Summary:

This bill authorizes the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to implement the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan by issuing Everglades Restoration bonds in amounts of up to \$75 million annually or in additional amounts if requested by the DEP to address specified needs, for the next eight fiscal years, beginning in FY 2002-2003. No series of bonds may be issued unless the debt service due in the year of issuance has been appropriated by the Legislature. Debt service will be provided from documentary stamp tax proceeds. Any bond proceeds will be deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund.

This bill amends ss. 201.15, 215.618, and 373.470 of the Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is an \$8.2 billion plan designed to ensure that sufficient and timely water is available for Everglades restoration and other water-related needs of the South Florida ecosystem. The CERP will be implemented over approximately a 40-year period and is to be funded equally by the State of Florida and the federal government. For the first ten years of the project Florida and the federal government have each agreed to provide \$200 million annually. The state's share of these costs is divided equally between the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), the required local sponsor for the CERP, and state government. The U.S. Congress has authorized, but not yet funded, four pilot projects, ten initial projects, and an assessment and monitoring program. Florida's share of these costs will total more than \$630 million.

Section 373.470, F.S., provides for the \$100 million annual state share of costs for the first ten years of the CERP, but does not specify the source of \$75 million of the state revenues to meet

this obligation. For fiscal year 2000-2001, \$50 million in general revenue was deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund, together with approximately \$29 million in accumulated interest from the Preservation 2000 Trust Fund for which no spending authority existed. In addition, \$25 million of the SFWMD's approximately \$36 million annual Florida Forever allotment was counted as part of the state's share of the costs since the state provides funding for the Florida Forever program. For fiscal year 2001-2002 and the eight consecutive years thereafter, the state's share of costs will be comprised of \$25 million in the SFWMD's Florida Forever funding and \$75 million in unspecified "state funds." The 2001 Legislature elected to use \$75 million in unexpended and unencumbered Preservation 2000 funds as the "state funds." Although Everglades restoration is a statutorily authorized use of Preservation 2000 funds, this use was opposed by the environmental community. Concern has been expressed that, as there is no dedicated funding source for the state's \$75 million share, the precedent has been established for the use of bond proceeds, such as Florida Forever funding, which are statutorily authorized for water restoration projects as well as land acquisition projects.

A further concern is that the 2001 Legislature enacted provisions in CS/SB 1468 that expressed the intent of the Legislature to restore the \$75 million in Preservation 2000 funds used for the CERP to the Preservation 2000 Trust Fund in the General Appropriations Act for fiscal years 2002-2003. In a time of uncertain revenues it may be difficult to continue to fund the CERP in fiscal year 2002-2003 from unspecified "state funds" as well as restore the \$75 million to the Preservation 2000 Trust Fund, as no source of funds for the repayment was specified.

The Natural Resources Committee recently completed an interim project report entitled "Alternatives for Funding the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan." The report identified several different ways to provide the state's annual \$75 million share of CERP funding for the next eight years. When staff presented its report at the committee's October 10, 2001 meeting, one alternative, the sale of bonds, evoked considerable interest among some committee members. At the meeting, Audubon of Florida also advocated the issuance of bonds for Everglades restoration, primarily as a mechanism to acquire needed lands in advance of escalating land values. While there is no doubt land values in the areas to be restored are escalating, whether the rate of increase would justify the assumption of bonded indebtedness at this time is not known. The Joint Legislative Committee on Everglades Oversight is in the process of requesting the SFWMD to ascertain the expected increase in regional land values in areas where CERP acquisitions are expected to be made, but this has not yet been accomplished.

The Office of Economic and Demographic Research has analyzed the impact of a new bond program totaling \$800 million over an eight-year period beginning in FY 2002-2003 to fund CERP land acquisitions. The office reports that there are two major options for issuing bonds secured by the documentary stamp tax. The first is to issue them as junior and subordinate to all existing bonds secured by the documentary stamp tax pursuant to Article VII, s. 11(e) of the State Constitution. There are more than adequate funds available in the general fund share of the documentary stamp tax to pay the debt service and provide sufficient excess coverage. Junior lien bonds will receive a lower rating than the P-2000 and Florida Forever bonds and may, therefore, require some form of credit enhancement (e.g., insurance) to make them marketable. For these reasons, the costs of issuance and the debt service costs will be somewhat higher for junior lien bonds than for parity bonds.

The second option is to issue the bonds on a parity basis with the P-2000 and Florida Forever bonds. Bond covenants pertaining to the existing bonds permit the issuance of new bonds provided that the pledged revenues equal at least 150 percent of the maximum annual debt service for the outstanding bonds and the proposed additional bonds. The office's analysis indicates that, should a downturn in documentary stamp tax collections occur after the initiation of a new bond program, the size of the downturn in collections that would be required to cause a problem with respect to the coverage requirement declines over time as the amount of the annual debt service requirement grows with each new set of bonds. Thus, in 2004-2005, documentary stamp tax collections could decline by 22 percent over the prior year without resulting in a violation of the coverage requirement. By 2009-2010, a decline of 10.5 percent is sufficient to cause a coverage problem. Therefore, working within the current Preservation 2000/Florida Forever program seems questionable for reasons of coverage.

The 2001 Legislature enacted s. 215.98(1), F.S., which states in part "...The Legislature declares that it is the policy of this state to exercise prudence in undertaking the authorization and issuance of debt. In order to implement this policy, the Legislature desires to authorize the issuance of additional state tax-supported debt only when such authorization would not cause the ratio of debt service to revenue available to pay debt service on tax-supported debt to exceed 6 percent. If the six percent target debt ratio will be exceeded, the authorization of such additional debt must be accompanied by a legislative statement of determination that such authorization and issuance is in the best interest of the state and should be implemented. The Legislature shall not authorize the issuance of additional state tax-supported debt if such authorization would cause the designated benchmark debt ratio of debt service to revenues available to pay debt service to exceed seven percent unless the Legislature determines that such additional debt is necessary to address a critical state emergency."

It appears that the state's current debt ratio slightly exceeds six percent. Increases in Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO) borrowing and transportation spending could further increase the ratio.

This proposed committee bill authorizes the sale of bonds independent of the Preservation 2000/Florida Forever bond programs.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1. Section 201.15(1) is amended to authorize the use of documentary stamp tax proceeds to pay debt service and other obligations relating to the issuance of Everglades Restoration bonds.

Section 2. Section 215.619, F.S., is created to authorize the issuance of Everglades Restoration bonds to finance or refinance the cost of acquisition and improvement of land, water areas, and related property interests and resources for the purpose of implementing the CERP pursuant to s. 11(e), Art. VII, of the State Constitution. Everglades Restoration bonds, except refunding bonds, may only be issued in fiscal years 2002-2003 through 2009-2010 and may not be issued in an amount exceeding \$75 million per fiscal year, unless the DEP has requested additional amounts in order to achieve cost savings or accelerate the purchase of land. This section limits the duration of Everglades Restoration bonds to 20 years and such bonds may mature no later than

December 31, 2030. Except for refunding bonds, no series of bonds may be issued unless an amount equal to the debt service coming due in the year of issuance has been appropriated by the Legislature.

The section specifies that the state covenants with the holders of Everglades Restoration bonds that it will not take any action which will materially and adversely affect the rights of such holders so long as such bonds are outstanding, including, but not limited to a reduction in the portion of documentary stamp taxes distributable pursuant to s. 201.15(1), F.S., for payment of debt service on Preservation 2000 bonds, Florida Forever bonds or Everglades Restoration bonds.

Everglades Restoration bonds shall be payable from, and secured by a first lien on, taxes distributable pursuant to s. 201.15(1)(b), F.S., and shall not constitute a general obligation of, or a pledge of the full faith and credit of, the State of Florida. Everglades Restoration bonds shall be junior and subordinate to bonds secured by moneys distributable pursuant to s. 201.15(1)(a), F.S.

The DEP is directed to request the Division of Bond Finance to issue Everglades Restoration bonds pursuant to the State Bond Act. The DEP must coordinate with the Division of Bond Finance to issue such bonds in a cost effective manner consistent with cash needs.

The proceeds of Everglades Restoration bonds, less the costs of issuance, the costs of funding reserve accounts, and other costs with respect to the bonds will be deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund. The bond proceeds deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund will be distributed by the DEP as provided in s. 373.470, F.S.

This section prohibits the sale, disposition, lease, easement, license or other use of any land, water areas, or related property interests acquired or improved with proceeds of Everglades Restoration bonds which would cause all or any portion of the interest on such bonds to be included in gross income for federal income tax purposes.

Any complaint for validation of bonds issued pursuant to this section may be filed only in the circuit court of the county where the seat of state government is situated, the notice required to be published by s. 75.06, F.S., shall be published only in the county where the complaint is filed, and the complaint and order of the circuit court shall be served only on the state attorney of the circuit in which the action is pending.

Section 3. Section 373.470(5), F.S., is amended to provide that as an alternative to the existing requirement that \$75 million in unspecified state funds be deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund, proceeds of bonds issued under s. 215.619, F.S., may be deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund. To enhance flexibility, funds to be deposited into the Save Our Everglades Trust Fund may consist of any combination of state funds and Everglades restoration bonds.

Section 4. A legislative finding is provided that the issuance of Everglades Restoration bonds is in the best interest of the state and should be implemented.

Section 5. The act would take effect July 1, 2002.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Economic Impact and Fiscal Note:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

Documentary stamp tax revenue used to repay Everglades Restoration Bonds would otherwise be available as General Revenue.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Assuming that bonds are issued at a 6 percent rate of interest, the cost of issuing \$75 million in 20-year bonds would be \$6.5 million for each year's sale of bonds. The annual debt service would grow from \$6.5 million in 2002-03 to \$52.3 million in 2010-11. These payments would continue through 2030-31, but would gradually decrease from 2022-23 until all the bonds were paid off. (Current law, by comparison provides that \$75 million in unspecified "state funds" would be expended annually for the next eight years.) If the DEP recommended the sale of additional bonds, and the Legislature implemented the recommendation, additional amounts would be expended for debt service. Such amounts are speculative at this time.

A bond-funded program will provide more certainty about the source of funding for Everglades restoration rather than the current year-to-year funding mechanism.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Amendments:

None.

This Senate staff analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's sponsor or the Florida Senate.
