

Congressman Brian Mast (FL-18)

Chair DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger and members of the Appropriations Committee, today I am here to advocate for the full funding of Everglades restoration and water quality infrastructure. Specifically, I request that \$725 million be allocated in the United States Army Corps of Engineer's construction account for South Florida Ecosystem Restoration in Fiscal Year 2022.

This committee has continually been supportive of Everglades restoration, and for good reason. The Everglades is a world treasure that has a massive impact on the way of life for millions of Floridians, including those I represent in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie Counties. Ensuring the preservation of this unique ecosystem is vital to the ecology, economy and public health of Florida, and we are at a critical juncture in the restoration process to do just that.

The Army Corps, after years of planning, studying and designing, has reached a point in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan where they are making significant progress:

- The Corps is nearing completion on massive reservoirs to the east and west of Lake Okeechobee that will hold a combined 71 billion gallons of water, and
- They are preparing for construction on the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir project that will hold 240,000 acre feet of water cleaned by natural treatment areas built by the state so that it can be sent to the Everglades when water is needed.

That's why, at this critical juncture, additional funding is needed.

Unfortunately, the federal government has fallen behind the State of Florida in meeting its half of the agreement with the state investing \$4.5 billion, while the federal government has only spent \$1.7 billion.

President Biden's \$350 million request for Everglades restoration shows a commitment to these projects, but honestly, more funding is needed to keep pace with the projects the Army Corps is ready to move forward with and with the investments made by the State of Florida.

That's why the Florida delegation was united—Democrats and Republicans together—in requesting a \$725 million investment in FY2022. Meeting this full request from our delegation would be a strong statement from this committee that restoring America's Everglades and protecting the public health of Floridians and visitors to our state is a top priority.

You may ask why the federal government is involved in this to begin with...

The Federal government must play a role in the solution because it created the problem by building the Herbert Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee and digging canals. This unnatural flow of water means the Everglades are starved of water, while the estuaries to the east and west are sent toxic water that is killing animals, making people sick and threatening lives.

To put an even finer point on it, this is an environmental justice issue on a scale unseen elsewhere in the United States. Last month, the city of West Palm Beach – home to more than 100,000 people – found their water supply contaminated with toxic algae as a result of the failing

water infrastructure we are trying to fix. That was just after water tested positive for toxins at the nearby Pahokee Marina more than 100 times more toxic than the EPA says is safe for human contact.

At the current funding level, these water quality issues that have plagued Florida for years will continue for years. So, Everglades restoration isn't just an environmental and ecological necessity, but it is the solution to a massive public health crisis, as well.

Almost every summer, my congressional district sees discharges of sometimes millions of gallons of freshwater that the ecology of our waterways wasn't meant to receive. If that wasn't bad enough, the water sent to us from Lake Okeechobee is poison. It is filled with nutrients that fuel harmful algal blooms that release toxins into the water and the air. These toxins wreak havoc on the St. Lucie River and the Indian River Lagoon, America's most species-diverse saltwater estuary, and the water filled with guacamole-like algae shuts down our economy. Who wants to vacation or buy a house in a community whose water looks and smells rotten? And who feels comfortable raising children or retiring near water that if you ingest or breathe around could lead to nausea, liver failure, tumors or even death?

This cannot be allowed to continue. We should not tolerate a government that knowingly poisons its own citizens.

I urge this committee to stand up for the men, women and children in Florida who have been forgotten – who are on the receiving end of toxic discharges that the government knows are poison.

Providing \$725 million for Everglades restoration puts Florida that much closer to making those kind of scenarios a nightmare from the past. So, thank you for the consideration of our delegation's request.