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EDITORIAL: OPINION

Protect taxpayers' investment in Kissimmee River restoration

By ORLANDO SENTINEL EDITORIAL BOARD
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FEEDBACK



FILE PHOTO: 2011. Newly built oxbows return a more natural flow to the Kissimmee River, originally a 103-mile-long shallow, meandering river that was reconfigured in the 1960s into a deep 56-mile-long canal. (Carlton Ward Jr.)

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To confront one of Florida's most pressing environmental problems – algae blooms fed by the release of nutrient-polluted overflow from Lake Okeechobee – the Legislature and Gov. Rick Scott agreed this year to invest \$1.2 billion to build a new reservoir south of the lake and spend another \$50 million to speed up repairs to the crumbling dike surrounding the lake.

FEEDBACK

But there are more steps that can be taken to reduce pollution in the lake and advance the larger goal of restoring Florida's Everglades. And not all of them have eight- or 10-figure price tags.

Freshman Congressman Darren Soto, an Orlando Democrat whose district includes Osceola County, has asked U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to begin the process of designating the Kissimmee River as a Wild and Scenic River. This modest request

deserves enthusiastic support from Florida's other members of Congress of both parties, as well as Scott.

Currently in Florida, there are only two Wild and Scenic rivers: the Wekiva, here in Central Florida, and the Loxahatchee, in Southeast Florida. This designation is intended to preserve rivers in their natural conditions, ruling out dams and other water projects that would adversely impact them. It's too bad this protection wasn't available decades ago for the Kissimmee River.

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The Kissimmee originates in Osceola County and flows south from Lake Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee. Audubon Florida calls Lake Okeechobee "the liquid heart of the Greater Everglades." It's critical habitat for animals, fish and plants.

The Kissimmee is a naturally winding waterway, but after hurricanes caused widespread flooding in the region in 1940s, Congress authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to straighten and shorten the river to control its flow, practically reducing it to a drainage ditch. This historically misguided project, carried out in the 1960s, dried out tens of thousands of acres of wetlands, decimating habitat for birds and other wildlife. It also sped up the flow of the river, sharply diminishing its natural capacity to absorb nitrogen and phosphorous nutrient pollution — much of it originating in runoff from Orlando — before it emptied into Lake Okeechobee.

FEEDBACK

In the 1990s, Congress directed the Army Corps to restore much of the Kissimmee River to its original, winding path. This \$1 billion undertaking is expected to be

finished around 2020. Already it has brought back more than 60,000 acres of wetlands and spurred a wildlife renaissance.

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A Wild and Scenic designation would help preserve the restoration of the Kissimmee River for generations to come. It would also protect taxpayers and their huge investment in the project. The cost of establishing and maintaining the designation would be minimal compared to the money already spent on the river.

In May, Soto sent Zinke a letter requesting a study for a possible Wild and Scenic designation for the Kissimmee. The congressman reiterated his request to the secretary in person at a House Natural Resources Committee hearing this month. Zinke's reply — "I'd be glad to work with you on that" — was promising.

Under federal law, either the secretary or Congress can designate a river as Wild and Scenic. Soto is working on legislation that would direct the secretary to do a study of the Kissimmee for possible designation once the river's restoration is complete. His office said he is consulting with landowners in the area, including ranchers and farmers, as well as environmental groups, before finalizing his legislation. Wild and Scenic designation does not impose restrictions on private land use, but promotes cooperation between property owners and government agencies on voluntary measures to protect rivers.

FEEDBACK

Every member of Congress from Florida has a stake in the success of the Everglades restoration and a healthier natural environment in the state. Those are compelling reasons for them to get behind Soto's request.

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