

11.09.2021 NPFPL Legislative Hearing

Congressman Darren Soto Witness Testimony

Thank you, Chair DeGette and Ranking Member Fulcher for your kind words and support in hosting this meeting today.

Thanks to my Florida colleague, Representative Vern Buchanan, for co-introducing this legislation with me. I'm also honored to co-introduce his Little Manatee Wild and Scenic River Act — another critical bill to preserve Florida's water supply, habitat coastal economy, and recreational opportunities for Floridians.

The story of the Kissimmee River and its restoration is nothing short of epic. The journey of the water that sustains the fabled Everglades is a divine miracle. Starting in the tiny Shingle Creek, the Everglades' head waters. Shingle Creek meanders south to Florida's 9th Congressional District, that I have the honor to represent. Then it eventually flows into the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes throughout our district. A beautiful natural chain known for boating, soaring bald eagles, snail kites, ospreys, and championship winter bass fishing.

From Lake Tohopekaliga to East Lake Tohopekaliga, to Lake Cypress and Lake Hatchineha, through to Lake Kissimmee. From there, the Kissimmee River begins in the south part of our district. It eventually flows into Lake Okeechobee and south to the Everglades.

Congress long ago made a grave mistake. The U.S. channelized the Kissimmee River in the 1960s and 70s, devastating ecological and agricultural opportunities. The birds disappeared, including 70% of bald eagles. The fish died in oxygen-depleted canals, and local ranch land around it dried up, hurting local agriculture. 20 years later in 1992, Congress authorized the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to begin the largest river restoration in the world. And this year on July 29th, 30 years later, the Army Corps of Engineers completed the project.

They restored 40 square miles of river, floodplains systems, 20,000 acres of wetlands, and 44 miles of river channel. The total cost: \$841,258,000. Now that we've spent nearly a billion dollars restoring the Kissimmee River, it's just common sense that we protect it. That's why I filed the bipartisan H.R. 4404, to now designate the Kissimmee River as a Wild and Scenic River. The winding river cleans the water headed to the Everglades, provides key fishing, kayaking and other recreational opportunities for residents. It's critical habitat for endangered species like the Snail King as well as our nation's bird, the bald eagle, and provides a water supply for local ranchers and residents. And now we have an opportunity to protect it.

We've received support from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. I had the opportunity to kayak with them on the river just a few years ago. I would also like to introduce to the record my home county Osceola Board County Commissioners' Letter of support for HR 4404 and the 2017 Op-Ed from the Orlando Sentinel, both supporting our bill.